

# 3 retarded public school students isolated as carriers of mild strain of hepatitis

By SYDNEY FREDBERG

Three handicapped pupils attending PS 69, New Springville, will be excluded beginning today from regular special education classes because they have been deemed carriers of a type of hepatitis.

The children will be segregated in a classroom with a new teacher until a firm citywide policy can be established outlining their future in the public school system. Dr. Helen Fuelner, director of Special Education for the Board of Education, announced yesterday.

Dr. Fuelner said approximately a dozen other retarded youngsters, including four from Staten Island, have been identified as hepatitis carriers in the school system. They will remain in their regular classes while city health officials review their cases individually, determining whether they shall be segregated, too, she said.

All former or current residents of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, the disabled pupils began to attend city schools last January when a federal law calling for equal access to the handicapped went into effect.

But at some point during their institutionalization, they became the unwitting carriers of a mild strain of hepatitis virus, called Type B, as an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the center's population has.

Persons in institutions worldwide have long been known to stand a greater risk of becoming Type B hepatitis carriers as a result of overcrowding and generally unhygienic conditions traditionally associated with such places.

But the three PS 69 children, as well as other carriers like them, do not have the disease, a liver infection characterized by nausea, headaches and sometimes jaundice.

Nevertheless, some parents and school officials have become concerned that under extraordinary circumstances, the carriers could transmit the disease to vulnerable pupils.

Those circumstances, according to medical experts, are limited to transmission by blood transfusion or by a human bite.

Although they refuse to place a percentage on the risk, the experts maintain it is negligible.

Dr. Fuelner, in announcing the Special Education decision yesterday to bar temporarily the PS 69 carriers from their

normal classes, explained that a team of city Department of Health physicians examined the children at the New Springville school this week.

They concluded there were "potential risks in these individual cases," Dr. Fuelner said, adding the determination was based on the fact that the pupils are severely or profoundly retarded and thus in need of supervision that might not be available in the integrated class.

She noted that even though the children had been attending the school since last January without incident of hepatitis, the Special Education office felt this solution the "only sensible temporary one."

The decision was based on "medical judgment, not necessarily sound educational policy," Dr. Fuelner acknowledged.

Indeed, Department of Mental Hygiene officials and other advocates of the retarded suggested that the exclusionary lack, although temporary, might constitute an unfortunate precedent.

They explained they have been attempting to "mainstream" the institutionalized retarded by placing them in community settings and school systems that have been traditionally biased

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against them.

Since there is little risk a Type B hepatitis carrier will actually transmit hepatitis, they fear that these children could be discriminated against merely because they're different from other children.

"The separate-but-equal doctrine (barring different educational standards for black and white children) was declared unconstitutional in 1954," a Willowbrook parent pointed out, "and here we are again."

Dr. Olive Pitkin, director of the bureau of school health for the Department of Health, said yesterday she hopes that within one month the city will have fully defined guidelines to deal with a problem bound to become increasingly more difficult as Willowbrook and other institutions try to place more and more children in public schools.

"It is a difficult and emotional issue," Dr. Pitkin said, "and we've got to try to place the needs of one against the needs of the many."

She explained the estimated 20 hepatitis carriers in the city's schools were identified from Willowbrook medical records, but said the number was undoubtedly higher than that.

Frank Kelly, principal of PS 69, has sent a letter to parents asking them to attend an informational meeting tonight at 7:30 in the school to discuss the subject of hepatitis carriers.

Dr. Gerald Spielman, director of the Staten Island Council on Developmental Disabilities, will address the parents, some of whom admit to being ignorant about the low risk involved.

He said he will attempt to explain to them that through the proper hygienic precautions, there is no reason for them to worry.

"We want to listen and we want to hear from the experts. And we don't want to make our minds up before the meeting starts," said Roberta Spivelman, president of PS 69's Parent-Teacher Association.

It was pointed out by Dr. Spielman and other physicians contacted by the Advance yesterday that there have been Type B hepatitis carriers in the New York school system for years — but that no "informational meetings" were held until now, the first time retarded individuals have become involved.

The experts noted there is a second type of hepatitis, Type A or infectious, **which is different and more serious than Type B and against which Willowbrook's retarded residents have been proved immune.**

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