

Hepatitis trio to remain segregated

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

School officials decided yesterday to adopt for now two apparently different sets of guidelines for city school children identified as carriers of a type of hepatitis.

One concerns three youngsters who will continue to attend a separate special education class at PS 69, Merry-mount Ave., New Springville, and the other deals with 17 other retarded youngsters whose presence in regular special education classes has not become an issue.

Dr. Helen Fuelner, director of Special Education for the Board of Education, said yesterday that because city health officials have failed so far to come up with a policy pinpointing what to do about the identified carriers attending public schools, "it is my personal decision there is such insignificant risk to others that it would be senseless to isolate them."

But because the health officials, Dr. Fuelner said, have already examined the PS 69 youngsters and have determined there is "potential risk in those cases," these pupils will continue to be taught in a separate room with a new teacher until a "better arrangement can be worked out."

Dr. Fuelner said the "better arrangement," details of which would probably be decided next week, might consist of adding more children to the newly formed class. Dr. Fuelner refused to say, however, if that meant that only persons identified as type B carriers might be allowed admission.

All of the pupils involved in the hepatitis carrier controversy, which became an issue last week when PS 69's principal, Frank Kelly, disclosed it in a letter to parents, are mentally retarded. All live or once lived at Willowbrook Developmental Center.

At Willowbrook, like institutions for the retarded worldwide, there is an exceptionally high rate of hepatitis carriers, far larger than in the general population, medical experts say.

But unlike the non-institutionalized

population in which carriers are often said to slip by unnoticed, Willowbrook residents are subjected to special blood tests, which determine whether or not an individual is a carrier.

Medical experts agree the risk of passing type B hepatitis from a carrier to other vulnerable persons is negligible but possible under certain unhygienic conditions as traditionally existed at Willowbrook.

And in her decision to keep the other retarded youngsters in regular classes, Dr. Fuelner referred to that "risk," noting: "I have not received any reasonable medical advice indicating they should be isolated. Children can get killed in a playground, too, or in a car accident," she said. "There is potential risk in everything."

Dr. Fuelner failed to say if the decision to exclude the three PS 69 pupils from normal classes might have resulted, in part, from parent concern; but she added that a city Health Department investigation "showed these retarded children to be in need of the type of supervision that might not have been adequate in the regular class."

Dr. Fuelner explained that teacher aides will be added Monday to the rosters of classes in the other schools where hepatitis carriers have been identified. Their responsibility, she said, would be to safeguard the maintenance of "perfectly clean conditions."

Hepatitis type B is a liver disease, fatal in an estimated 1 percent of all cases, that causes nausea, lethargy and jaundice.

Carriers can avoid giving the disease to others by avoiding sharing of personal toiletry items, using plenty of soap and water when washing and making sure blood from open cuts is not passed to others, medical experts say.

But parents remain concerned because they insist some severely developmentally disabled persons have more difficulty maintaining this care.

"Everyone tried to explain it to them," Dr. Fuelner said of some parents' opposition to the children's presence. "If they're still this worried, there's really little I can do."

Roberta Spivelman, president of PS 69's PTA, could not be reached for comment yesterday, but another parent who refused to be identified said: "We're not complaining because these children are retarded. We want them out because there is a risk. If you were a parent, what would you do?"

Dr. Fuelner said the Board of Education decision will stand, pending any contrary ruling from the Health Department.