

UpDate

Still no guidelines on hepatitis carriers

Last October, parents at PS 69, New Springville, discovered that three pupils attending the school had been identified as carriers of a type of hepatitis. Medical experts explained that the trio, all mentally retarded and former residents of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, did not have the disease but could, under unhygienic conditions, transmit it to others.

The parents were alarmed, and the special education division of the Board of Education responded to the furor by isolating the carriers in a classroom all their own. But Dr. Helen Fuelner, special education director, recognized it was not the best solution to the problem. She vowed that with the aid of the Health Department, city officials would draw guidelines for placing hepatitis carriers.

There are still no guidelines, however, and a spokesman for the Health Department says: "We're still working on them. When they're formulated, we'll make them public."

The apparent inaction made observers wonder if the city was dragging its feet on a touchy issue since the PS 69 controversy appears to have blown over.

The issue, however, is bound to come up again and again. For as more mentally retarded persons are released from state institutions, which have traditionally been breeding grounds for the disease, more individuals in the school system will be cropping up as hepatitis carriers.

The Willowbrook Review Panel, a court-appointed committee that monitors Willowbrook, has taken a strong stand against the city for isolating the PS 69 carriers. Panel members argue that the case represents outright discrimination since non-retarded carriers have never been victims of the same segregation policy. They voiced their protests in letters to the state Education Department and the state Office of Mental Retardation, but as yet the response from both agencies has been non-committal.

Meanwhile, the PS 69 youngsters remain secluded. Additionally, there has been no word on the future of at least two dozen more identified carriers — all retarded former Willowbrook residents — who may eventually enter the city school system.