

It's your opinion

Better methods than Willowbrook's

As a special education teacher working on Staten Island, I must respond to Winifred McCourt's letter June 16.

Ms. McCourt, I also work with children who are considered to be severely retarded. As a teacher in a private day school on Staten Island, I've had opportunity to work with children living in various residential environments. Last year I worked with our younger students, ranging in chronological ages 7-14. The children lived either at home with their natural parents; a foster home with foster parents, or in Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Since the issue in question is the success of Willowbrook, I shall limit my observations only to those children in my class that resided at the institution. It would be foolish of me, however, to flatly state that some of the problems encountered with the Willowbrook staff did not apply to my other students as well.

One of our school's basic principles and goals is to work closely with the parents and guardians of our students. Home visits were as much a part of our basic curriculum as what occurred in the classroom setting. Much of this curriculum involved Activities of Daily Living Skills (A.D.L.) such as self-feeding, toilet training, cleansing and dressing skills.

Ms. McCourt, in your letter you stated you "knew and cared for some of those children (for eight years). I knew what it was like to feed them, to clean them, and excuse it, to wash their own soil out of their mouths when they tried to eat it." It appears, Ms. McCourt, that though both of our intentions are good, methods and goals differ vastly. My two Willowbrook students, ages 10 and 11, arrived in my classroom in diapers, with poor dressing skills and even poorer feeding skills. Primary goals for them included toilet training, self-feeding and self-dressing with as minimal an amount of physical and verbal prompts as possible.

How much easier it would have been for me to work with one or two foster parents in order for the necessary carry-over procedures be established so that these goals might be attained, instead of three shifts of Willowbrook personnel.

During an evaluation session with the building team leader, we were so bogged down with paperwork for the state there was little time to go over what had been accomplished to that point. I did have opportunity to state my goals for my two students; however the methods needed to accomplish these goals were brushed over completely. The attendants sitting in on the session did all but laugh at me. Yet as angry and frustrated as I was, I sympathized as well. Attendants who were responsible for more than a dozen children could not possibly be expected to carry out my carefully laid-out plans.

So while I habitually had my students change from diapers into training pants almost every morning for many months, I would find that upon arriving back on the ward the children would be changed back into diapers. I ask you, Ms. McCourt, how can a teacher carry out an effective program without the full cooperation of his guardians? My students were capable of being toilet trained; they did maintain bladder and bowel control in the classroom after many months. The time that probably could have been saved if the cooperation of the Willowbrook staff were available and forthcoming is immeasurable.

These so-called "spastic, mindless, helpless humans" can be trained to their fullest potential, whether that results in being travel-trained or merely stacking boxes, or perhaps stuffing an as yet to be completed pillow, in a carefully supervised sheltered workshop. But whatever their potential, even "mindless" humans are capable of sensing an accomplishment, if given the chance. But it does take a properly trained staff, with a home environment that best meets the needs of the child, so that such training can be carried over into the home.

How I remember attempting to teach my students how to eat a sandwich without squeezing it apart, stuffing it in their mouths. Believe me, it's not easy when in the institution they are given semi-solid mixtures. Granted, it may be nutritionally balanced and vitamin fortified, but it seems inexcusable to me to have 10 and 11-year-olds on "baby food" if they are physically capable of eating solid foods. Yet I realize when dealing with masses of people as opposed to a few, it is difficult to supervise and enact a proper feeding program.

Which leads me to believe that a massive, institutional setting cannot compare with a smaller group home or foster home setting. Parents of exceptional children, for various reasons, must have alternative placement options open to them. However, Ms. McCourt, I must disagree with you, Willowbrook was not the answer, not when there are viable alternatives.

Now if only those who screamed so loudly to shut down the "vegetable factory" would open their eyes and allow these viable alternatives to materialize, perhaps then there would be even more concrete proof for Ms. McCourt and all others as skeptical as she.

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