

Program may fall to budget ax

By ED BARBINI

Can you imagine going to school and finding out that your teachers have been replaced by puppets?

It doesn't happen every day, but thousands of Island students have listened and learned about the problems of the handicapped through lessons taught by three-foot puppets in a special program called The Kids Project, sponsored by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

"Our teachers marvel at how effective the program is, as well as how positive the reaction is among students," said Mitchell Streat, principal of PS 8 in Great Kills. "The ladies who coordinate the program do an outstanding job in a true teaching sense, and the kids learn to appreciate that all people can contribute to society."

made the program become extremely successful.

"Unfortunately, the demand for more performances remains beyond our current ability to meet our needs," Byrne concluded.

The program is entering its fifth — and perhaps final — year. Several New York City agencies have banded together to jointly sponsor the two area troupes, but there may not be enough money when the state budget is decided upon this Tuesday — or in future budgets — to ensure its continuation.

"At some point in the future we may have to resort to public fund-raising to keep the program alive," said Ron Byrne, director of public education for the OMRDD. The program is currently offered free to schools, because, as Byrne commented, "some schools simply don't have the money, and we can't ask them for \$50 or \$60."

It costs the state about \$40,000, including salaries, to keep each troupe going, and Byrne says it's money well spent.

"The Kids Project is the greatest," he remarked, noting that the Island troupe has done "countless thousands of shows" and has

capped kids," Ricciardi said. "The program takes place in front of a small group of students, and the intimate setting allows kids to speak more freely, thereby learning about a topic that was previously alien to them."

The show utilizes a style of puppeteering known as *Bunraku*, a Japanese method in which Ricciardi and Dwyer make no effort to hide or disguise the fact that they are doing the talking.

"We dress in black, so we blend into the background easier," Ricciardi noted. "That's because we're not the stars of the show."

The three-foot-tall puppet "stars" include Ellen, a mentally-retarded veterinarian's assistant, Reynaldo (who is blind), Mandy, (who is deaf), and Mark, a cerebral palsy victim who does "wheelies" in his wheelchair.

Each handicapped puppet has its own skit and then answers questions from the students.

"After a while, the students don't realize that it's adults speaking as puppets," remarked Iris Pianko, a language arts teacher at Markham Intermediate School, Graniteville, which hosted The Kids Project last month. "They begin to relate to the puppets as other kids, and that allows them to eliminate the common stereotypes that they might have picked up elsewhere."

"We've gotten terrific feedback from everyone, especially children," said Ricciardi, who notes the troupe to a different school every day. "It's such an uplifting feeling to receive let-

ters from children after they've seen the show. You know that the program has done what it set out to accomplish."

The program doesn't end when the puppets are packed into the trunk, however. Follow-up materials, including bibliographies, simulation exercises and sign language charts, are provided to teachers after the performance. These resources are designed to reinforce what the children have learned during the show, and help teachers discuss the subject of disabilities throughout the school year.

Although the performance takes less than two hours, the lessons learned last for a long time.

The students at Markham, for example, are keeping scrapbooks, citing the accomplishments of the handicapped, and the school's newly-formed journalism class will devote an entire issue of the school paper to handicapped issues, explaining what kids can do to help the disabled adapt to school and society.

"The puppets were very interesting," said Jennifer Bergonzi, a sixth-grade Markham student. "When it was over, everybody wanted to learn how to help handicapped kids participate with others."

"It's rewarding when kids see past the puppets and view the problems that the handicapped face every day," Liz Ricciardi concluded. "Kids who care about each other might grow up to be compassionate adults — that's what The Kids Project is all about."

"It's an excellent way of reaching children and dispelling their misconceptions about handi-