

But the school for children, they maintain, has been unfairly criticized from the start.

The 1995 report was based on staff interviews, site visits and reviews of Eden II committee meeting minutes, incident reports, investigation reports and other correspondence.

The report emerged before a backdrop of a 1988 state order criticizing the facility's treatment and ordering change. That state order was updated in 1989 and in 1995.

The 1988 review of Eden II was performed at the state's request by Walter Christian, an adjunct clinical professor of psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine. He concluded at the time: "I find that Eden II is inadequately, cruelly or unsafely caring for developmentally disabled persons at both its school and its adult day program."

As a result, OMRDD placed Eden II under a "cease and desist order" in 1988 — which has yet to be lifted — that demanded safer treatment of its clients, staff retraining, better oversight of staffers and changes in some administration. That order was accompanied by the threat that if improvements did not occur the agency would be reported to the state Attorney General's Office for legal action.

Back in 1988, Eden II admitted using some physical punishment but denied that such actions con-

stituted cruel or unsafe care, according to state documents. To this day the use of sometimes forceful contact and even physical punishment — called aversives — remains a controversy in the treatment of autism, though New York State has spoken against such procedures.

Eden II officials, however, insist that such aversives have not been used at the school since the 1988 cease and desist order.

But the controversial 1995 report concluded that problems there have persisted.

The 20-page document details more than a dozen staff accounts of abuse and mistreatment between 1993 and 1995. They include accusations that a teacher slapped a preschool child, that a teacher forced a student to eat a piece of turkey that he had vomited, and that a teacher had applied hot mustard to the tongue of a child to punish the child for spitting.

Also, the report indicated that Eden II had "flagrantly violated" mandates that oversee the handling and review of incidents and allegations of abuse, glossing over many incidents.

The report starkly contrasted the positive image Eden II paints in its color brochure, which shows photos of staff and children working together in harmony. The brochure notes that Eden II was formed in 1976 by parents of children with autism. It has a school for autistic children at 150 Granite Ave. in Elm Park, and an adult program that includes a 10-bed group home in Arden Heights.

On Staten Island, Eden II employs about 11 teachers and 35 assistants for about 70 students. It has an annual budget of about \$3.5 million, most of it coming from the state.

Autism is a severe developmental disorder with symptoms that can include a sense of social detachment and unresponsiveness, self-injurious behaviors and other mental disabilities.

The 1995 OMRDD report concluded: "The staff reports of abuse appear to be credible: some reports are corroborated by another witness."

According to the report, several workers said they were afraid to report incidents for fear of being punished by agency administration, whom, the workers said, tacitly endorsed abusive techniques to handle behavior problems.

Management of the facility was also criticized.

"Allegations of abuse are routinely not reported, are not thoroughly investigated, and are not appropriately reviewed," said the report.

In addition, the report asserted that staff and management had not been properly trained in the reporting of incidents. One staff member told investigators that he started as an assistant teacher in 1992 with no training other than being handed the agency manual.

OMRDD officials keeping a close eye on Eden II said positive steps have been taken.

"There were problems," said Deborah Sturm Rausch, director of public affairs for OMRDD, "and there have been positive changes."

Eden II has appointed a new director, placed new people on its board of directors, initiated staff training and added a new level of staff oversight.

Ms. Rausch stressed, however,

that the full investigation into Eden II continues. "They are being evaluated regularly," she said, noting that if progress does not stay on course, the facility could be closed down.

Eden II Executive Director Joanne Gerenser vehemently argued against the report's assertions that children are being mistreated at the school.

"There are no practices in this program that place any of the kids

in inappropriate situations," said Ms. Gerenser, who has served as executive director for the past 10 months. She is part of the new regime at the facility.

Above all, she stressed that the school does not use physical punishment in handling problem youngsters. At one time such techniques were used widely in the treatment of autism, she said, but recent data reveals that positive enforcement is more effective.

During a tour of the facility given to the Advance, Ms. Gerenser spoke of a 5-year-old girl who came to the school with severe problems that led her to continually bang her head and bite her hands.

"In her case, music meant a lot to her. To reinforce her not banging her head, we turned on music every 30 seconds," she said. Showing the Advance the girl, Ms. Gerenser said, "Now we don't