HOW FAR SHALL THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM CARE FOR THE FEEBLE-MINDED? 1

By ANDREW W. EDSON, New York City, Associate City Superintendent of Schools.

The feeble-minded children who should be in attendance at public schools are those children somewhat below par in mental acumen, possibly merely of slow development, yet susceptible of intellectual growth. Idiots and imbeciles are institutional cases, not public school charges. A careful examination by a specialist may determine if a child proposed for a special class is hopeless and should therefore be committed to an institution. A very large number of cases, however, must necessarily be those on the border-line between imbecility and merely slow development, cases that even trained experts find it difficult to diagnose with certainty. These are the children who by the right kind of training may improve intellectually in a very marked degree or who by neglect will soon sink into a hopeless and helpless condition. If educable, even to a limited extent, their place is in a special class in the public schools.

Modern education emphasizes one principle clearly: Every child is entitled to all the education which he is capable of receiving. This principle applies to all children, not only to the great majority but to the mentally and physically handicapped irrespective of cost. The very fact of existence gives the child the right to a training that will lead him to be happy, self-respecting, and self-supporting. One very noticeable feature in the training of children is the fact that they are happy, or likely to be, when usefully employed. And while children of low mentality may never become leaders, may need oversight and guidance throughout their lives, yet if they have learned to use their hands to advantage, the elements of a trade possibly, they may be self-supporting, or at least less of a burden upon their families and upon the state by reason of the training received. This alone is enough to warrant the expenditure.

1 Read at the Conference on the Conservation of School Children, Lehigh University, April 3, 1912.
The right of a child carries with it the duty of the state to provide this training. A handicapped child is a great burden upon any family and is likely to be a menace to society. As an economic measure, therefore, the expense of an education should be borne by the state even if the per capita cost is heavy.

The particular reasons why a child slightly sub-normal should be educated in the public schools, in school buildings with normal children, though not in classrooms with them, are: (1) This arrangement is an economic one. Taxpayers and members of boards of education are obliged to consider the expense entailed in any educational proposition, especially in one that is a decided departure from traditional usage. A suitable room in some school building can be secured easily and equipped at small expense. In some cases it may be necessary to consolidate classes in order to provide a room, even to put some of the younger pupils on part time, but it should be done. Part time is not a serious evil for pupils of the first year grade. (2) The matter of travel to and from school is a serious consideration for feeble-minded children. Public school buildings are usually located near homes and are easy of access. (3) The opportunity to go to and from school with normal children, to associate with them on the playgrounds and in some of the general exercises of the school must be of the highest value to children of undeveloped mentality. Such association for a portion of the day must have a tonic influence upon them, a decidedly better effect than would the realization through complete isolation that they are set apart as dullards. (4) And the leading argument perhaps is based upon the fact that these feeble-minded children are of all grades of dullness, some of them but a little off from normal, cases of slow development it may be, and possibly behind grade in only one or two subjects. By having the classes of sub-normals in ordinary school buildings, the children may be allowed to go to regular grade classes at certain periods each day and in certain subjects in which they show the most interest and greatest aptitude. In this way many a child may soon be transferred permanently from the special class to the regular grade class gradually and naturally.
A strong argument for the assignment of these exceptional children to special classes is the relief to the teacher and children of regular classes; a great burden is thereby lifted.

In order to understand just how one city handles this question, I may be permitted to explain briefly the plan followed in the City of New York which has 120 classes of mental defectives in its public schools.

In the first place the principal and class teacher make note of children who by their looks, language, or actions give indication that they are peculiar—that they are freaks or unusually stupid. After a few days of special observation the following blank is filled out in regard to such and forwarded to the Inspector of Ungraded Classes as they are called:

**Observations on Children Proposed for an Ungraded Class.**

\[\text{P. S. \ldots , Borough \ldots . . . . . . . .} \]

Name........................................................................Address.................................
Age... Grade... Nationality F. .............. M.................................................................
Years in U. S........ Home Conditions...............................................................Health Records: Nutrition....... Bone Dis........ Enl. Gl........................................
Teeth....... Throat...... Nose...... Vision R....... L......................................................Hearing R....... L....... Nervous Disease......................................................
School Records: Kn’dg...... terms 1A....... terms 1B...... terms........
2A....... terms 2B....... terms 3A....... terms 3B....... terms Spec’l........
School att...... Cause of Irreg. att. ........... Absence in last........
two terms....... Attention....... Memory....... Oral Exp..........................
Hand Work...... Phys. Tr........ Number....... Reading..................................
Writing....... Spec. Tastes....... Disposition....... Behavior..................................
Habits....... Peculiarities..........................
Other information................................................................
.........................................................19.........................................................Principal

As soon as possible, the Inspector and the Medical Examiner call at the school and make a thorough examination of the child, entering their observations upon the following blank:
P. S. Borough

Name.

1. General Condition.
   A. Anatomical.
      Cranium.
      Facial Asymmetry.
      Palate.
      Teeth.
      Tongue. Lips.
      Eyes.
      Ears.
      Limbs.
      Skin.
      Body in General.

B. Physiological.
   1. Motor Function.
      Tics. Tremors.
      Epilepsy. Nystagmus.
      Promptness. Coördination.
      Prehension R. L. Gait.
      Speech. Fatigue.
   2. Sensory Function.
      Eyes R. L. Ears R. L.

C. Psychical.
   Balance. Proportion.
   Moral Sense. Attention.
   Memory. Will.
   Peculiarities.


e. Family History: Births.
   Miscar. Deaths.
   Cause of. Diseases F. M.

Medical Examiner

Recomendation

Insp. Ungraded Classes

If it is decided that the child is below par, he is sent to some ungraded class near at hand. Here in a class of from 10 to 15
pupils he is given individual attention with special emphasis upon physical and manual training. At every point an attempt is made to arouse his dormant energies, to strengthen his muscular and nerve powers, to cultivate self-control, and to strengthen his intellectual, moral, and esthetic faculties.

A pedagogical record is made four times per year in order to enable the Inspector of Ungraded Classes to note possible improvement. The following is a copy of the record sheet:

**Pedagogical Record.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Borough</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 20</td>
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- Sense Training
- Physical Train. (imitation)
- Physical Train. (command)
- Writing
- Industrial Training
- Language (oral)
- Language (written)
- Reading
- Arithmetic
- Nature Study
- Personal Habits
- Self Control
- Effort
- Gen'l Information
- Power of Attention
- Power of Memory
- Power of Judgment
- Gen'l Health
- Fatigue
- Attendance

Teacher

From time to time a medical re-examination is made as per the following:
### MEDICAL RE-EXAMINATION

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<tr>
<td>P. S.</td>
<td>Borough</td>
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</table>

**Name**

**General Condition**

**Nutrition**

1. **Motor Function**
   - Tics
   - Tremors
   - Epilepsy
   - Nystagmus
   - Promptness
   - Coordination
   - Prehension, R. L
   - Gait
   - Speech

2. **Sensory Function**
   - Vision, R. L
   - Hearing, R. L

3. **Condition of Heart**
   - Pulse
   - Throat

**Remarks**

Medical Examiner

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It is our purpose to select classrooms that are large, sunny, and easily accessible from the street and to the playgrounds and sanitaries. The special equipment is fifteen movable and adjustable seats and desks—fifteen being as large a number of pupils as can well be handled in a class—four shop benches and equipment, physical training equipment, a piano if possible, running water, and porcelain sink.

The course of study is adapted to the needs of individual pupils, manual and physical training predominating. The greatest liberty possible is allowed teachers in adapting the present course of study for the grades to the needs of the individual members of the special classes.

Our teachers are volunteers from the ranks, who are paid $100 per year additional. Many of them have taken courses at the Vineland Summer School, and by observation, study, and experience, are growing to be skilled teachers in this particular.
field. The fact remains, however, that but few teachers of these special classes are suitably prepared. If kindergartners need a two years’ course of special training for their work, surely the teachers of exceptional children, where expert knowledge is required, need a course of special training of equal length. Any six weeks’ course of special training is but a mere beginning.

In general then it may be affirmed that the movement for the education and training of exceptional children in the public schools, one group of which is the feeble-minded, is spreading throughout our cities. It is one of the best aspects of modern education. The submerged tenth is beginning to come to its own, a right that it has always had but one not fully recognized.

In view of the efforts and progress made, the success attained, and the light that has been shed on this problem, I beg leave to offer the following suggestions:

1. In every city there should be a recognition of existing conditions. Sub-normal children—variously known as backward, dull, feeble-minded, or of slow development—are with us. They can be found if the school authorities and medical fraternity will but open their eyes and look about them.

2. There should be established in each city a psychologic clinic, possibly in connection with the city hospital, under the control and direction of the Board of Education, for the purpose of examining and classifying all children deemed by the teachers and school physicians as somewhat peculiar, below normal, exceptionally dull. At this clinic the degree of mental deficiency should be determined by scientific methods; full and accurate records of school work, home conditions, and hereditary data should be obtained and filed; and a proper assignment of each case should be made, some to school, to particular phases of school work, and others should be remanded to state institutions as custodial cases.

3. Suitable classrooms in regular school buildings should be secured for these children, and suitable equipment provided.

4. The classes should be small, not more than 12 or 15 in a class, in order that these children may receive individual instruction.

5. Specially qualified teachers who have a natural aptitude
for the work, should be selected—teachers who have infinite patience, tact, resourcefulness, intense human sympathy, an appreciation of effort, and unbounded faith in the young people entrusted to them—teachers who are students of the latest literature on the subject, which is abundant, and who make frequent visits to schools where instruction to exceptional children is given.

6. The management should be kind and sympathetic. Love, sympathy, and a cheerful attitude will lead these children—or any children for all that—far better than nagging, threatening, or punishments.

7. A suitable course of study should be provided—a course that gives emphasis to the essentials, that is flexible, and is adaptable to the needs of the individuals, a course that leads directly to some vocation.

8. The instruction should be personal and individual, and should give emphasis to physical and manual training, to nature study, excursions, and illustrative material. The much-talked of Montessori method is undoubtedly well worth a careful study by teachers of feeble-minded children.

9. In this work the skilled teacher and skilled physician should labor side by side. Many of these children have serious physical defects that should be remedied as soon as possible. The training should be corrective and curative, physical as well as intellectual.

10. And, if the school authorities do not do their duty towards these unfortunate children, if lack of funds or lack of interest is in the way, people of means and warm hearts should be appealed to to see that this work is done.