

Public Education Association

OF THE

CITY of NEW YORK

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Work for Mentally Defective Children in New York City

Twelve years ago the suggestion was made that a class should be formed in old Public School No. 1, under the Brooklyn Bridge, for children who, for one reason or another, were misfits in the regular grades. The class was formed, and Miss Elizabeth Farrell was placed in charge. Through physical examination and medical care, through transfers back to the regular grades and the removal of the most incorrigible boys to truant schools, the class was sifted and resifted until finally it resolved itself into a group of children who were mentally backward, or even actually defective. Since that time there has been a growing interest in school provision for such children and the work has enlarged with great rapidity, until at the present time there are 144 classes caring for about 2,300 children, with a constant increase in the number of applicants from the grades. Thus the problem is distinctly one of school management, for such children are constantly entering the schools; the question before the authorities is one of classification, not of originating new work. The fact to be determined by careful observa-

tion sometimes extending over a considerable period of time, as well as by scientific tests, is whether children who seem backward are permanently so or not.

There are two reasons for forming such classes:

First: To remove from the grades the children who are falling behind and who show no sign of being able to keep up with the regular work, and the children, who, because of peculiarity of disposition, are a real hindrance to the class work of the normal children.

Second:—To provide a means for offering to every child some opportunity for training, whether he be "fit" or not.

Because of the increase in the number of such children found in the schools, in September, 1906, these classes were formed into a Department of Ungraded Classes, and Miss Farrell was appointed inspector. A few months later a physician from the Department of Physical Training was detailed to act as examiner, and a year ago a substitute teacher was assigned as clerical assistant. Up to December, 1912, that has been the

whole staff to deal with a situation which affects the progress of all the pupils in the schools, as well as the opportunity for possible usefulness of an amazingly large number, estimated by Dr. Goddard at 1 per cent. of all school children.

In March, 1912, the State Charities Aid Association, through its special Committee on Provision for the Feeble-minded, presented to the Committee on Elementary Schools of the Board of Education the following resolutions:

Resolved, That the Board of Education shall be urged: (1) To classify mentally all children of school age under its supervision or brought to its attention by the Permanent Census Board or other agencies. (2) To determine as far as possible, by scientific methods, the degree of mental deficiency of those reported as sub-normal. (3) To keep full and accurate records of all sub-normal children, including school work, home conditions and heredity data. (4) To send to the proper state authorities the names of such children as are deemed to be custodial cases.

Through their fitness for the regular grades, the large majority of school children are automatically classified. By the complete carrying out of (1) all children who appear to be misfits would be classified and provided for educationally, and eventually trained to their highest degree of fitness. This does not seem too high an ideal nor too great a burden for the schools to assume. These resolutions were adopted by the Elementary Schools Committee and sent to the Board of Superintendents, that they might determine what force would be needed to carry them into effect. After

the resolutions had passed through their hands and through the Committee on By-Laws, the Board of Education was asked to ratify the following positions: two assistant inspectors of ungraded classes; two physicians on full time and regularly assigned to the Department of Ungraded Classes; two social workers or visiting teachers.

The Public Education Association took up the matter and obtained the co-operation of various organizations, among them the City Club, the Association of Neighborhood Workers, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, the Woman's Municipal League, and the Local School Boards, in the effort to induce the Board of Education to take favorable action. This co-operation took the form of letters to the Board and its committees and the personal attendance of representatives at hearings and conferences. A member of the Association staff gave a large part of her time to maintaining active co-operation among these organizations and between them and the school authorities. The Board was urged to establish the position of visiting teachers on the basis of the work done by the field worker from this Association who was regularly detailed to Miss Farrell's office in September, 1911, and worked through last year, visiting particularly difficult cases, securing medical care, placing children in institutions, and obtaining the facts as to home and family conditions as recommended in the original resolutions presented by the State Charities Aid Association.

After much discussion, ending in a hearing before the Committee on Elementary Schools attended by many physicians, most of whom were entirely in sympathy with the proposed

increase in the department, the resolutions ratifying these positions, as well as additional clerical assistance, were passed in October, 1912.

The schools pursue the following method in reporting and examining children suspected of mental defect:

A letter is sent from the City Superintendent to the principals of the elementary schools requesting them to report children who seem to be mentally defective to the Department of Ungraded Classes and suggesting that the principals give their attention "to the conspicuously backward children; to those who are apparently unable to learn to read; to those who have very deficient number sense; to those who are truants, or show a tendency to the habit; to those who seem incorrigible; and to noticeably irritable, nervous children." The report on each case is made by the principal on a card which has space for facts on home conditions, questions of health and school records. This card when filled out is forwarded to the Inspector of Ungraded Classes.

In response to these reports examinations are conducted in particular schools in each district. Especially difficult cases, or cases reported by individuals or agencies outside the schools, are referred for examination to Miss Farrell's office. These examinations conducted by the physician in charge and often confirmed by advice from outside clinics, decide whether or not a child shall be transferred from a regular grade to an ungraded class, and also whether or not he is purely an institutional case and can receive no benefit from the school training. Each child in the ungraded classes is supposed to be re-examined once during the year. It has not been possible to

carry out this plan completely or satisfactorily because of the great pressure of work upon the department.

With the increased staff it is hoped that more frequent and more satisfactory examinations can be made and that a better as well as more adequate classification within the ungraded classes themselves will be possible. A normal course for the ungraded class teachers has just been established in the Brooklyn Training School for Teachers and this should do much to improve the teaching in these classes and also make available a larger force of trained teachers.

Private clinics and individual physicians have co-operated most generously in examining school children for mental defect and in providing treatment for physical handicaps which might conduce to backwardness. Many agencies are interested in the subject of mentally defective children, and various visitors, both paid and volunteer, have done home-visiting which has helped greatly to elucidate the problem and has sometimes even succeeded in solving the immediate difficulties in the way of a child's advance in school work.

We have been told by doctors and psychologists, in terms that we cannot dispute, that actual feeble-mindedness is incurable, that feeble-mindedness is hereditary, and therefore, that institutional care and constant supervision are the great safeguards against the rapid and appalling increase of feeble-mindedness. We must all agree that the end to work toward is permanent custodial care for all the feeble-minded who have reached the age of 14 years. Before this age the schools can do much to develop the incomplete individual and train him to a point of dis

tinct usefulness in his later institutional life, or, if he must remain in the community, they will at least have endeavored to develop his latent possibilities of usefulness to their fullest extent. It has been suggested that the schools may easily become stepping-stones to the institutions and that those who have proved themselves, during this period of observation, unable to compete with normal individuals or to take their place in the community without danger of causing harm to themselves or others, should graduate, as it were, from the ungraded class to the institution. In any case, public opinion must be educated to the necessity for some form of permanent and compulsory custodial care.

As to institutional care, the state has accepted the theory of state care for all dependent defectives, but there is no law to compel parents to place or to leave their children in institutions, and the state institutions where such care can be given are full, many of them having long waiting lists. The new institution at Letchworth Village will finally accommodate 2,500 inmates. It will be some time, however, before this institution is completed and then it will not be able to meet the constantly increasing demand.

The city maintains an institution on Randall's Island where about 1,200 feeble-minded, both children and adults, are being cared for and trained in simple school work and in various industries. Plans are being made for enlarging this institution and the facilities for laboratory treatment at the hospital and for visiting the homes of the children are being increased. The Department of Charities is supposed

to care for all the dependent defectives who apply at its office and on account of the frequent discharges from the city institution it is nearly always possible for all applying for admission to be received there.

There are a few private homes and institutions which are always full. The latest one to be established is an observation home at White Plains, maintained by the Woman's Municipal League, where from 12 to 14 backward boys from the Children's Court are sent for care and treatment.

The Department of Charities has recently established a Clearing House through which all children must pass in order to enter institutions and with which many agencies are co-operating. This greatly increases the facilities for examinations within the department and for bringing together into one place records formerly scattered. Otherwise it does not apparently alter the situation, since it cannot immediately provide more room within institutions or make normal individuals out of feeble-minded children.

The important fact seems to be that some legislation must be secured to facilitate the proper commitment of mentally defective children who have shown themselves likely to become law-breakers, and that the usefulness and the happiness of those feeble-minded who are not law-breakers, but who cannot adapt themselves to a normal life in a city community must be increased and fostered. All interested in the subject should work together for these results, using every existing agency as a help toward the solution of this most pressing problem.