

Plan to break up OTI is opposed

By JACKIE KLEIN

Mentally handicapped youngsters aren't inoculated against all other problems of childhood. They have some of the infinite combinations of emotional and behavioral difficulties.

This is one belief that has made the Berkeley-based Oakland Training Institute's 10-year-old program for the mentally and physically retarded so successful. Nearly 300 young persons ages 14 to 25 are enrolled in the institute which operates in the Pontiac and Madison Heights as well as Berkley.

A strong organization of parents of trainable OTI students are pressing a resolution to decentralize operations. Intermediate Oakland County School District Superintendent William Emerson has proposed splitting OTI into four centers to allow for anticipated growth and to bring services closer to students' homes.

LOCATIONS PROPOSED are Farmington, Lamphere, Pontiac and northwest Waterford. Emerson suggests using available classroom space in South Oakland under separate jurisdiction of the four school districts. The institute would be abolished, and the same services would be provided with the county and state funding the bills, he said.

A decision on the issue was postponed until a 4 p.m. special meeting today of the Oakland County Intermediate School Board in Pontiac. Trustee Harold Bussey of Southfield urged the delay because the full five-member board was not present at the last session.

Bussey, also a member of the Southfield Board of Education, said he would not approve Emerson's resolution without more definite assurances about staff employment and programs for students.

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—OTI teacher

PARENTS AND OTI teachers have picked the intermediate school district offices, saying plans to decentralize the program will undo much that has been accomplished and "ifs" will be sold down the river.

"Our goal," said one OTI official, "is to enable the student to adapt within his limitations rather than to convert him into a fictitious version of the non-handicapped child."

Staff members say some minor miracles have been accomplished at OTI. They tell the story of Jimmy, 15, of Southfield who has been in the program two years.

"JIMMY WAS in a parent-run program because his behavior was so bizarre he wasn't accepted in any trainable district," a teacher said. "His parents were desperate and took him from one school to another. The child was retarded and had no speech."

Jimmy had autistic characteristics, and it couldn't be determined if he was hearing-impaired. Whatever the diagnosis, he was considered unacceptable and was expelled from five trainable programs. OTI was the only school willing to take a chance with him.

The first year Jimmy acted out his frustrations against students and teachers and was generally destructive. But, according to a staff member, his teachers never lost patience and were convinced he was a worthwhile person who would shape up once they were able to get through to him.

"AT THE END of that first year, under proper guidance, understanding and strict behavior modification, Jimmy was pretty much in control and followed rules," his teacher recalled. "The second year, he could read a little, do some math and was socially acceptable to his peers."

One parent said her son was born hydrocephalic and the doctor predicted he would be a vegetable. Now 17, the boy has been at OTI four years, functions reads at a third grade level and converses within his limitations.

"Every child is an individual to us," another teacher said. "Each one bleeds, hurts, cries and feels rejection like everyone else, only more so. We know every facet of each personality, and the OTI program is highly individualized."

"Every student is handled with a set of behavioral objectives. Upgrading academic and social skills takes years and we're concerned all this will be lost if the program is dismantled."

OTI, operated by Oakland Schools and financed by a special education tax, with costs shared by the state department of education, accommodates 15 students in each classroom. The team-teaching approach is used.

"Throughout the day, each child is instructed by four certified, qualified teach-

ers in manipulative skills, social adaptability, language skills and physical education," a staff member said. "OTI also provides pre-vocational skills, workshop and a variety of outside activities."

Jane, a 17-year-old student, is typical of young persons at the institute who are on the borderline between severely mentally impaired and trainable.

IN HER formative years, Jane had no schooling and never learned to speak, her teacher said. She now responds, is socially acceptable and can communicate within limits.

"There are a dozen Janes in the program who are functioning as normally as possible," the instructor said. "They really don't fit into a trainable program, but we

can handle them. What will happen to them if we close OTI? They could end up in an institution."

Among children with mental handicaps, those for whom ultimate development between a three- to seven-year level can be predicted are considered trainable.

"THESE ARE the ones who, with present, repetitive instruction, can learn to care for their personal needs and function as members of a family and society," a staff member said.

"They're taught to be helpful, self-sufficient to a degree and step-by-step to perform to the best of their capacities. The Junes, the Janes and the Janyes have been upgraded because they've been integrated in classes with more knowledgeable peers. These students could regress in a week if they're placed in splintered programs."

A spokesman for the OTI parents club called the proposed change a high-risk venture, a shocking surprise and a breakdown in rapport. Parents are concerned that the current OTI staff may not be transferred to local districts.

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