

She caters to students with special learning needs

Florence Skroll's name is often at the bottom of a list of last chances for troubled students.

A private education counselor, Mrs. Skroll finds schools for students who need special attention or who can't get in the public school system.

They could be kids who would be helped simply by a change of environment. They could be gifted students who need a school that will concentrate on their talent.

"This is a service to meet the particular needs of an individual child. That's the point of the service—not what kind of school, but what kind of child needs a school," she said.

"Otherwise, I would have nothing to offer."

A licensed psychiatric social worker, Mrs. Skroll worked as a child guidance counselor for the state for 20 years before she struck out on her own 10 years ago.

"I started this out of necessity," she said. "When I was in child guidance we saw children who were very carefully studied. When we were through studying them and were ready to make a recommendation, no one knew anything about the schools available, except through a cold directory."

"I thought we ought to really know what we are talking about and see these schools."

She tried to organize a service like hers through the state. But when the department of education decided it wasn't feasible, she began collecting the data that now lines the office in her Troy home.

Last year, she placed more than 100 students in private schools. She made four trips out East and saw more than 25 schools.

Her bible is a directory to U.S. private schools. The shelves and file cabinet brim with information on schools and the programs they offer.

Mostly, the students Mrs. Skroll helps are those who aren't making the grade.

"A great number of kids are under-motivated, underachievers. They have the potential but they are not achieving."

"They seem to need a much smaller school, where there is personal knowledge of the youngster."

"Often, they need a neutral environment, away from home, from parental nagging, and their peer group."

Through interviews with the student and his or her parents, a study of the student's background including school records, tests and problems at birth, Mrs. Skroll locates a school that will meet the specific needs of the youngster.

For example, one student was not doing well academically, but was great in ice hockey. Mrs. Skroll's task was to find a school that was strong in education but that also had a good ice hockey program.

"What you want to do is have a student find his area of success, he needs that for his ego."

"I had another student who had

severe reading problems. I placed him in a wonderful school and now he's ready for the ninth grade. He's developed a talent in drama and music, so now I have to find a school that offers music and drama and some kind of remedial reading program."

The biggest placement problem, she said, is the student who is dependent on alcohol or drugs.

"They can't stay in school if they have that problem," she said. "There are a few facilities that can take them, but for many reasons, the student doesn't belong in them."

"Sometimes there is a good boarding school that will try to work with the kids on many levels. Other schools will just expel them."

Sometimes, Mrs. Skroll said, the youngsters problem will clear up once he's away from home or his social environment.

No matter what the problem, though, Mrs. Skroll said she tries to find a school that will answer it.

"Every child is like a book," she said. "I have a great deal of compassion for kids. We must keep on trying to find clues to them, to see if we can hit the right place."

"We need to have a lot of tolerance for children. We must try and try again until it works."

OFTEN, MRS. Skroll is the parents' last try. Most of her referrals come from child psychiatrists, tutors or parents who have used her services. She is not known by the public school counselors, but recently helped in the formation of Independent Educational Counselors Association, a group of individuals like herself who make their living by filling a void in the public educational system.

There are only 47 counselors like Mrs. Skroll in the country and just two in Michigan.

Many parents, she said, are indignant that they have to find and pay a private counselor to get a good education for their child.

"They have a feeling that this (placement) should be an adjunct to the board of education," said Mrs. Skroll, adding that she agrees.

That it but because it isn't doesn't mean the service should not be offered, she said.

An added problem for parents is the cost of private schools.

"Private schools are very expensive. It's very sad in many of the eastern states, if the state cannot pro-

vide what the child needs, the department of education will pay for the private education. But they don't do that in Michigan."

"I've had mothers who had to go out to work to pay for their child's private education. Some people take out loans."

Mrs. Skroll charges \$200 for her services. The initial interview is \$25. It is not a luxurious living, but it does, she said, give her a sense of accomplishment.

"Supplying kids with the kind of help they need and knowing you've had a part in it is certainly satisfying," she said.

"Of course, what I wish is that this was all free . . . or that there was no need for a job like this."

With the school system being what it is, not only in Michigan, but through-

out the country (she has clients in Indiana and Ontario), Mrs. Skroll's knowledge and connections are in demand.

It is nearly impossible for public schools to meet the needs of every child, she said. That is her challenge.

"In special education, the classes are too large and it's too difficult to handle many youngsters. And maybe, the teachers are not as involved as they might be."

"And for some kids it is better for them to be away from home. It's a lot easier for someone who is not a parent to say, 'this is the time you sit and study.'"

By finding the school that offers that to a youngster, that motivates him, helps him over the hard stuff, and boosts his ego on the easier tasks, Mrs. Skroll hopes to save the child from becoming a drop out statistic.

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"I have a great deal of compassion for kids. We must keep on trying to find clues to them, to see if we can hit the right place."
—Florence Skroll

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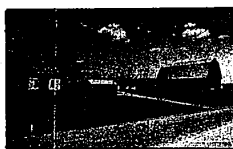
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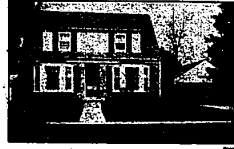
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