

Educable children

by [Luther Granquist](#) // March 10th, 2011

Advocacy groups, supportive members of the Minnesota Legislature, and a University of Minnesota professor collaborated to achieve approval by the 1957 legislature of a law, which mandated that schools provide “special instruction and services for handicapped children” considered “educable” according to standards of the state Department of Education. They also obtained approval of a law permitting school districts to provide “special instruction” for “trainable” children, children who could “reasonably be expected to profit in a social, emotional or physical way from a program of teaching and training” The failure to mandate services for “trainable” children reflected a longstanding controversy about whether these children should be served by schools or by public welfare agencies.

Since 1915, the state had provided limited funding for school districts that chose to educate children with disabilities. But the first special education standards set by the state Department of Education in 1919 excluded children in what became known as the “trainable” category:

“All children with a mental development below fifty per cent shall be regarded as too defective for proper care and training in the public schools and shall, so far as possible, be sent to the proper state institution at Faribault.”

Subsequent versions of these standards explicitly restricted admission to special classes to students with an IQ from 50 to 80, although a note added to the 1943 and 1950 standards declared that “pupils with intelligence quotients below 50 are a responsibility of the local community and should not be neglected.” The St. Paul schools had in fact provided classes for these students, first in 1934 at a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project at Hill School and then at Crowley School.

In 1951 the state Department of Education changed direction and authorized state funding for children with less than a 50 IQ. By 1955, 12 communities had special classes for “trainable” children. That year the legislature, in response to a proposal by the Minnesota Society for the Mentally Retarded, established a commission of eight legislators to make a detailed and comprehensive study of the needs of handicapped children. Two legislators who later became governor led the commission, Elmer L. Andersen and Al Quie. The commission consulted extensively with Dr. Maynard Reynolds from the University of Minnesota.

The legislature’s actions in 1957 reflected the recommendation of the commission which, in turn, reflected the debate whether “trainable” children belonged in school at all. Following that session, Reynolds chaired a subcommittee of the Advisory Board on Handicapped, Gifted and Exceptional Children. While the entire subcommittee agreed that there was “a public responsibility for Trainable Retarded children,” Reynolds and others favored sending these children to school. Dr. Dale Harris, Director of the University’s Institute on Child Development opposed that position. Ultimately, the group recommended that “the life long program for Trainable Retarded” individuals be placed in the Department of Public Welfare but that schools which chose to provide classes for them would be supervised by the Department of Education.

As a result it was not until 1971 that the legislature mandated that schools in Minnesota serve all those children.

With an Eye to the Past on the DD Council website includes comments by Andersen, Quie, and Reynolds on these issues as well as copies of the Commission and Board reports, Department standards, and other related special education studies.

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