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History Note

Report on 'mentally defective' children reflects past attitude

by Luther Granquist

In 1925, Frederick Kuhlmann, the widely re- spected Director of the Research Bureau of the Minnesota State Board of Control, wrote a lengthy report, Outline of Mental Deficiency for Social Workers, Teachers and Others in Minnesota. (The Board of Control was the equivalent of the Department of Human Services during that era.)

Kuhlmann included his estimates of the cost to the schools of Minnesota's "mental defectives." At that time about 20,000 "mental defectives" were in regular classes in Minnesota's public schools at a cost he estimated as more than \$1,500,000. Kuhlmann contended that "most of this is waste, because no useful returns are obtained."

In his judgment, these children profited from regular school work "only in a limited measure, some not at all in any degree, none for the full period up to the age of 16 years." Kuhlmann's estimate did not include the "custodial cases," whom he described as "cases too low in intelligence, or handicapped by physical disabilities as paralysis" and thus incapable of receiving any "useful training." These children, he noted, never got into the schools.

In Kuhlmann's view the disproportionate time and energy teachers had to spend on two or three "mentally defective" children in a regular class caused a greater expense, although he could not place a monetary value on it: "The chief cost lies in the diminished returns for the expenditures for normal children." He concluded that providing segregated special classes for the "mental defectives" would actually be cost-effective because the number of normal children in a regular education class could be increased.

The language may differ, but many objections today to special education funding reflect Kuhlmann's failure to value education and training for children with disabilities. His entire Outline is on the Developmental Disabilities Council web site at www.mncdd.org/past/pdf/25-OMD-Kuhlman.pdf ■

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