✓ PROVISION FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

BY JAMES H. VAN SICKLE.

Superintendent Baltimore Public Schools.

The problem of educating extremely backward and defective children in the public schools is a comparatively new one. Before compulsory attendance laws began to be strictly enforced, public school authorities had no adequate idea of the magnitude of the problem. Children who failed to get along fairly well in the ordinary classes either by reason of their low mentality, or their refractory bearing, or both, often ceased to attend, and were absent or truant without the knowledge of the authorities. In an article in *The Teacher*, December, 1907, Dr. Witmer comments upon this fact in discussing the evolution of special classes in the Philadelphia schools. Before attendance at school was enforced by law the Superintendent had reported that there were not enough backward children in any neighborhood in Philadelphia to form a special class. By 1900 there were reported 1,122 children in the schools too backward for the usual grade instruction.

The experience of Philadelphia is the experience of Baltimore and doubtless of all large communities. Before the attendance laws were effectively enforced there were as many of these special cases in the community as there are now; few of them, however, remained long enough in school to attract serious attention or to hinder the instruction of the more tractable and capable.

If it were not for the fact that the presence of mentally defective children in a school room interfered with the proper training of the capable children, their education would appeal less powerfully to boards of education and the tax-paying public. It is manifestly more expensive to maintain small classes for backward and refractory children, who will profit relatively little by the instruction they receive, than to maintain large classes for children of normal powers. But the presence in a class of one or two mentally or morally defective children so absorbs the energies of the teacher and makes so imperative a claim upon her attention that she cannot under these circumstances properly

instruct the number commonly enrolled in a class. School authorities must therefore greatly reduce this number, employ many more teachers, and build many more school rooms to accommodate a given number of pupils, or else they must withdraw into small classes these unfortunates who impede the regular progress of normal children. The plan of segregation is now fairly well established in large cities, and superintendents and teachers are working on the problem of classification, so that they may make the best of this imperfect material. Whether or not school boards really approve spending money upon the education of mentally defective children, the enforcement of the compulsory attendance laws leaves no other course open. We are committed to their education so far as their capacity permits. The movement for their education is supported on other grounds by those who are not very much, if at all, concerned with the financial side and the need of protecting the rights of the more capable children. The investigations of modern science, as well as the philanthropic sentiments that actuate people in every community, have reinforced the practical and economic arguments which were the primary considerations whenever public school authorities had formed special classes.

The action this very year of the Baltimore School Board in establishing special classes for epileptics illustrates this fact. Formerly a child, who was subject to severe attacks, was not allowed to attend school after it was known that an attack was liable to occur in the school room in the presence of other children, some of whom were sure to suffer nervously in consequence. Even after the compulsory attendance law went into operation we excluded the worst cases; but we were surprised to find in the spring of 1907, on taking a census of these children, that we had 83 of them in school. Almost wholly as a protective measure, and in the interests of the normal children, it was decided to try experimentally their separation from other children. Three special classes were authorized by the Board and two were organized early last fall. We wish to study these two before proceeding further.

At once it may be said, "Why make the education of epileptics a public school matter at all? Institutional care is needed by these children." This is true of a large number of them, certainly, but perhaps not of all. Home and day-school care are sufficient for the less serious cases. Institutional care

is, however, at present out of the question. Maryland has an excellent school for the feeble-minded at Owing Mills, just outside of Baltimore, but it is more than full, and it has a long waiting list of applicants. Not until the state realizes the magnitude of this very problem and increases the capacity of the school can the city send all or any appreciable number of its epileptics of school age to this state residential institution. Meanwhile they must receive such instruction as will best fit them for self-support or partial self-support, and they must not be allowed to remain in the regular school rooms. Besides accomplishing a useful educational purpose the segregation of the mentally defective children will call attention to the need of enlarged facilities at the State institution where undoubtedly many of these children ought to be.

Not all parents are as yet willing to send their afflicted children to the special class. The very existence of the class, however, enables us to relieve the regular class of the presence of the epileptic child, for now, when we exclude him from the regular class, we are not depriving him of opportunity for such education as he is fitted to receive. On the contrary we are offering him an opportunity superior in several particulars to that which he had previously enjoyed. We give him a teacher especially fitted in disposition and attainments to look after his welfare. We furnish him with car tickets if he lives at a distance from the school. He works in a room especially equipped for his comfort, should he be ill in school hours. In it are work benches and tools and materials of various sorts, besides the ordinary equipment of books. There is a garden in which he may work. He is released from the exactions of the ordinary school curriculum. His teacher studies his capabilities and gives him what he needs.

We have not yet forced attendance in these classes. The teachers visit the homes of those children reported to them for transfer to the special class, and in most cases succeed in securing parental consent and co-operation through tactful explanation of the advantages offered.

One of the supervising principals, Dr. C. A. A. J. Miller, physician as well as teacher, is giving special attention to the work in two classes. After three months' experience he submitted the following notes:

"The epileptics in our care up to date can be divided into three classes from the standpoint of ability:

1. The bright;

2. The mediocre;
3. The weak-minded.

"The first class, the bright, of whom there are but few, take up all the school work as readily as the ordinary healthy child. The second, or mediocre class, upon whose minds the disease has made considerable inroads, are like children of arrested development; they gradually though very slowly take to the various studies and manual work and profit thereby. The third class are those whose minds have possibly been permanently weakened by the disease. Even these are educable.

"We of course take the word educable in the widest sense and claim that we are succeeding if through our efforts in school we are effectually teaching our pupils:

1. The common school branches:
2. Manual work of some kind;
3. Obedience, attention, manliness and fortitude, the acquisition of which is doing away with the *needless petting and humoring*;
4. More correct habits pertaining to personal cleanliness, exercise, eating, drinking, sleeping, etc., the practice of which is producing *better physical condition and greater cheerfulness and hopefulness.*"

Dr. Miller quotes from each of the two teachers and then sums up as follows:

"The conclusion that we are compelled to draw from classroom experience in our work with epileptic children is, that they are educable; some are making marked progress in the common branches, all are accomplishing something; all are doing well in their manual work which is tending toward a vocation that may be pursued at home, sewing, basket-making; (later on we shall try cooking, housekeeping, willow-basketry, chair-caning, broom-making, modern cobbling). All are hopeful, cheerful, and growing in power of attention and concentration; some are establishing better personal habits and following to a limited extent rules of hygiene. In fine, the general progress is good."

It is open to question whether it is at all necessary to separate the epileptic feeble-minded from other feeble-minded or backward children or even from the disciplinary cases. It is asserted that the refractory boy is made more gentle and sympathetic by being allowed to help the teacher care for an afflicted classmate. If this view is correct it simplifies the problem of special classes; for it

is easy to find fifteen or twenty children needing special treatment within an area so small that the question of transportation need not arise.

These were by no means our first speical classes. Ungraded classes, not differentiated very much as to grades of defect in children, whether mental or moral, were authorized under a rule adopted by the Board of School Commissioners in the year 1902. This rule appears under the chapter headed *Discipline*. It provides that pupils who cannot work to advantage in any regular class may be transferred to an ungraded class. As the rules prohibit corporal punishment, the disciplinary function of these classes in connection with refractory pupils, forced into school under the operation of the compulsory attendance law, was at first more appreciated by teachers than the help they would afford to mentally defective children. The boy, who by reason of persistent bad behavior at his home school, is obliged to walk a greater distance to attend an ungraded class, begins to see that since a record of good conduct is a prerequisite to his re-entering his former school bad conduct does not pay, and in many instances he chooses the path of less resistance—that of good conduct. In new surroundings he is likely to be less of a leader than perhaps he was in his former school. He finds his supremacy disputed by other boys, earlier on the ground, who resent his air of domination, and who, though without definite intention to aid the teacher, nevertheless help to coerce the newcomer into a more modest bearing. A transfer to a still more distant ungraded class is a resource in difficult cases, but it is seldom necessary to use it.

We now have twenty ungraded classes, but they are not all of the disciplinary type. A more or less successful attempt has been going on for some years to separate the disciplinary cases from those that are plainly defective or positively backward without marked disciplinary complications. Often one type so shades into another that there is no very clearly defined or conspicuous boundary line for our guidance. In such instances, if we have more than one class in a given locality, we secure the assistance of medical examiners employed by the Commissioner of Health, who are most willing to co-operate with the teaching force in making a proper grouping.

New York, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Chicago, and some other cities have quite recently set examples worthy of study and emulation in their recognition of differences among backward,

defective and refractory children and their selection of means by which each variety of defect may receive as nearly as possible the proper treatment. Plans recently put into operation in St. Louis are perhaps less well known than others on account of their very recent promulgation. In November, 1907, Superintendent Soldan reported to the Board of Education that there were at that time in the various public schools of the city 181 children so mentally defective as to be incapable of doing the regular school work provided for normal children. These were not merely slow or backward children. They were unable to do either the amount or kind of work which even a slow child can do; yet these children were considered capable of education with educational facilities adjusted to their needs, and with constant supervision of their physical condition. Nine children cited by Superintendent Soldan as typical of the entire list ranged from nine to fourteen and a half years of age. They had attended school from three to six years. Four had not advanced beyond the first grade; and only two had advanced beyond the second. "Nature," says the report, "puts the defective child in a class by himself and Education should take Nature's hint." It was recommended that twelve school rooms be selected and equipped, not as makeshifts, but in the best possible manner, with a view to meeting a permanent demand. As to location, the report discusses the advantages and disadvantages of a central school; of vacant rooms in existing schools; and of small houses to be rented for the purpose; and recommends that ordinary two-story, six-room houses, conveniently located with reference to the homes of the children, be rented. Each house is to accommodate two classes of fifteen children each, and leave room enough for work and free movement and some yard room for recreation. Transportation is to be furnished to those children whose homes are not within walking distance. There are to be two teachers in each center, and a woman attendant who will live in the building and take care of the heating and cleaning and at times assist in taking some of the children to school. The instruction given will not follow any fixed course, but will be adapted to individual needs. The teachers must be exceptionally capable and sympathetic, and will be among the best paid teachers in the service. Some strong teacher is to give her whole time to the supervision of these classes, and medical attendance is to be furnished. Imbecile or demented children are not to be admitted, nor are merely slow or backward children to be taken from

schools near their homes and put into these classes. Attendance is not to be made compulsory. If the new institutions are made so excellent that it is a clear advantage to each defective child to attend, it is argued that no compulsion will be necessary. Should a parent prefer to send his child to one of the regular schools, no objection is to be made, provided the child does not disturb the rest of the school by his presence.

To meet the present needs of the city of St. Louis for the education of defective children, the Board ordered that three houses be provided and they appropriated \$12,000 to cover the expense of the special schools for the remainder of the present school year. A later report shows that three special centers of two classes each, organized on the above-described plan, are now in operation and that each center has a waiting list of applicants for admission.

Great changes have taken place everywhere in courses of study and plans of classification and promotion since the days when exceptional children began to be studied with some approach to the scientific spirit. Careful classification requires that children of about equal working power be grouped together, so that none shall be held back on account of slow-moving classmates, nor shall any be unduly hurried through the course. Sometimes these very great ameliorations of former rigid and unwise school arrangements are overlooked by those who discuss present-day conditions. They also overlook some home conditions which are very important factors in over-pressure. For instance, a recent study made by the teachers of one school of 500 pupils in a foreign section of Baltimore shows that 76 children, ranging in age from six to thirteen years, are obliged by their parents to attend a denominational school from one to two and a half hours daily, in addition to the five hours which they spend in the public schools. Many of these boys sell papers in the morning before school. Thus they have no leisure; they scarcely know the meaning of play; their parents have no conception of the physiological limit to mental activity. No wonder these children appear anemic and show signs of fatigue. Before this study was undertaken, it was the opinion of the teachers that the children were suffering from lack of sufficient food, and they were agitating the question of giving them daily a nourishing meal at the city's expense. They found by investigation, however, that there were very few parents who could not afford to supply their children with proper food.

Unwise selection of food rather than insufficient food was characteristic. Carelessness and ignorance on the part of the parents as to what children should eat and drink, rather than poverty, were found to be the causes of the trouble. It is the home that must be reached, and the child through the home. This school is only one of many in which such conditions obtain.

For such conditions the school curriculum cannot be held responsible. The school is meeting these conditions in part by introducing as much activity and variety as possible into the daily program. It is also trying by means of parents' meetings to reach the home and influence it against such oppression of children.

A good city school of to-day is so flexible in its grading, its curriculum, and its methods, that in its regular classes it can do well by all except about one or two per cent of its pupils. These few must have special care. Among these even the deaf and the blind, once thought to be institutional cases, are in a few cities received into the public schools with good results. This is true of those who come from good or fairly good homes. In the public day school they are managed in separate classes for a portion only of their work. They mingle with other children in some of their work and recreation and thus are better prepared for their later life among normal people than they would be if limited to association with other children equally afflicted. The day schools for the blind and deaf in Chicago and Milwaukee are of this mixed type.

I have watched with much interest the progress of a blind girl through the grades of one of the public schools of Baltimore. She is now in the seventh grade and is doing work that measures fully up to the average for the class. At my request the mother of this child, formerly a teacher, has given me an account of her experience as follows:

"This blind child learned her first play from children of normal vision in a public school kindergarten, and on being sent at six years of age to a residential school for the blind she was then able to distinguish the difference in actions and to miss the kind of play to which she was accustomed. After about twelve months of attendance at the residential school, we found she was developing into a very different child from the one we sent away. Then we were thankful she was so young, but it took several years of home influence, which means so much to a blind child, to eradicate the evils of association with children from the worst parts of the city.

"Upon the advice of the Superintendent of the Institution for the Blind, she was sent to a school among children who could see. He had noticed the change in her, and said that a child who has a good home ought to have the benefit of home training. In most of the schools for the blind the number of attendants is insufficient to give the care to young children necessary to train them to be clean both in body and in mind.

"The first year in the public school was an experiment, the lack of books and appliances of all kinds being the greatest difficulty. By using the Braille writer we copied the lessons from day to day and found on every hand some one to suggest ways and means of doing everything. The inability of the teachers to understand that a blind child could comprehend as easily as a seeing child was another difficulty. But after a few weeks that was overcome in every case where a change was necessary. Each year the work of the parents grew easier; they were able to procure more books as the child advanced in her studies.

"She has become so much like the children with whom she associates that they often forget her affliction and treat her as any other playmate. She is independent of them in every way possible to a blind child. From the children she had learned to sew, darn, knit, crochet, cook, and do many other things. She is happy excepting when she comes in contact with another blind person who speaks of his affliction. We have found that among themselves blind children dwell too often on this topic.

"As the writer spent nine years in the school room as a teacher she feels justified in believing that the child is getting all and more than all it would be possible for her to get in a school where she would be among the blind and away from the outside world for the greater part of the year. She has now been in the public schools for four years with no special help excepting from home; but she has not had one complete year of school work on account of her health. She is thirteen years old, is well informed on the general news of the day, is a good musician, and is interested in everything about her. She reads *all* systems for the blind. On consulting her present teacher in the seventh grade we find her 'getting as much or more than any child in the class' without any partiality being shown her or any extra work being given her by the teacher. It seems to me possible that any parent with a fair education should be able to take a child to the high school.

"We have let each year take care of itself, and feel that we are doing the best possible thing for her. We do not find her an exceptionally bright child, but normal in all things."

In a special class for the deaf or blind the special teacher would serve the purpose of this mother to a group of five or six afflicted children, and she would secure the co-operation of other teachers in the building in the ordinary class work.

School attendance laws which are the expression, after all, of humanitarian sentiments, have forced upon our attention more than ever three classes of children—the backward, the defective, and the refractory. Many of these, with proper training, will become self-supporting, useful citizens and are where they belong when in attendance at a public school. Others should spend their lives in a state institution which would protect them from the crushing competition of the capable, meanwhile using the products of their directed labor for their entire or partial support. Thus the state would at the same time protect itself by keeping the manifestly sub-normal from propagating their kind. Until the state makes adequate provision for a task, the magnitude of which has not been realized by legislators, the town and the city must provide for defectives in special classes; for the rights of normal children cannot be safeguarded when 50 per cent of the energy of the teacher is expended on 5 per cent of the pupils in the class.

In dealing with exceptional children the co-operation of teachers and physicians is absolutely essential. The teacher of the special class needs to develop to some extent the insight characteristic of the skilful diagnostician, and the school physician needs to be a good deal of a psychologist.