

Pohukaina School

By Kent M. Keith
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[Note to reader: This article was written after attending a meeting of parents whose children were students at Pohukaina School. The italicized portions of the text represent their voices.]

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No society, perhaps, has ever adequately helped these children: the malformed, the disabled, the retarded, the handicapped. In primitive cultures they were killed. Today we respect them as human beings and we teach them. But we do not look into their eyes. They embarrass us. We don't know what their behavior means, and we don't know how to behave toward them. We feel uncomfortable, out of context, when we are with them. They make us begin to wonder what it means to be a human being— but the thought is too large, and we shut it out. We hear the anguish of their parents, and we look again at the parents, closer, wondering why it was that they had children like that. We don't know. We feel sorry. We find teachers who are trained to understand the children we do not understand. We put them all in a few old buildings. Then we turn away. We will help them a little because we are humane. We do not help them enough, because we cannot look into their eyes.

I can't tell you what it's like to have a baby and take her home from the hospital and be told by the doctor that she's retarded and will never be able to do the things that other children do. I can't tell you what a crushing blow that is. I can't tell you what it's like to live with it all day, every day, for a lifetime. Everything is so much harder. Everything takes so many more years. And there's so little help. We went from doctor to doctor, getting tests and trying to find the right help, but there was no help. I cried. I prayed. I talked to everybody I could think of. Finally my daughter got into Pohukaina School. They've helped her a lot. I'm really grateful, and so are the other parents. Our children have a chance, now. We fight for Pohukaina School.

We call it special education. The students have special teachers, and they have special buses which bring them to Pohukaina from all over the island. The Department of Education hopes eventually to have special education facilities in each district, so children won't have to spend so many hours on buses each day. The DOE is even planning to rebuild Pohukaina School. As of now, however, the

buildings are run down and the school is under-staffed. Retarded children do not seek new environments, experiment, or teach themselves as well as normal children do. That means that they need all the stimuli that teachers and specialists can bring to them. Unfortunately, DOE attention seems to have drifted away from the children and their teachers to unrelated uses of the school grounds.

I don't know what the hell the DOE thinks it's doing. We have a new building on the school grounds. Just great. It's a book processing plant. Can you figure that out? We have a nice and shiny new building for books. When did books get to be more important than kids? It really makes me angry. As if that wasn't enough, you know what the DOE did next? They started talking about building a storehouse. A storehouse, for heaven's sake. No other school in the state has a storehouse. They're going to build a big one at Pohukaina where the kids are retarded and handicapped and more likely than kids at any other school to be hurt by trucks coming and going all the time using the storehouse. I tell you, the people who do the planning don't even know what kind of school this is. They think it's a regular elementary school, so they decide to build sinks and mirrors low enough for seven-year-olds. If they just came to the school and used their eyes, they'd see that a lot of the kids are sixteen and full adult size, and they can't use those sinks and mirrors without getting down on their knees. Really, it's incredible. Pohukaina sent in specifications for a lavatory big enough for kids in wheelchairs, but the DOE planners just changed it—just like that, without calling up the school or anything—so the lavatory was built regular size and kids in wheelchairs can't use it. The DOE doesn't pay attention to the school, it just does what's convenient for the DOE. Wonderful. Maybe the DOE is happy, but the kids suffer. Did you know we don't have a nurse? The Department of Health bungled that one. They got Pohukaina mixed up with another school. All they had to do was get on the phone and find out, but they didn't bother. You know, we need more speech therapists and teacher-aides so the students can get more individual attention. We need a full-time diagnostic prescriptive teacher and a full-time counselor, people who can measure the growth of the kids, guide their education, and place them in the next stage when they're ready. We need these kind of people at Pohukaina more than anyone else needs them. But we don't get them. This is special education. Real special.

The DOE says that it spends more per capita on special education students than regular students. The problem, however, is that the disadvantaged need *a lot* more help to make their educational opportunities anywhere near “equal” to those of more fortunate children. This high level of support has never been given. The irony is that if more support were given to schools like Pohukaina, the long-term

costs to society would be far less than they are now. With proper facilities and staffing, Pohukaina can teach more of its students how to survive in the world on their own, some of them earning small incomes from trade jobs they learn at school. Without proper facilities and staffing, fewer students can be successfully trained, and more are likely to become a public burden for life. More important is the fact that a retarded child who grows up to be productive is a person who has a chance to become part of the community, proud of his or her own ability to produce something of value, and continuing to learn over the years while working with others. A productive child is also a source of happiness for parents and guardians. It is the one way in which the years of loving, suffering, and anguish can be granted a clear sense of satisfaction and success. And there is another benefit which might be reaped by finally giving special education the support which it needs to be successful. We might humanize “normal” society.

You don't know what it's like to love a mentally retarded child. Sometimes I look at the parents of normal children and I wonder if they even know what love means. It's so easy to love a normal child. Normal children do things everyone can be proud of, or at least understand. You can shout at normal kids and worry about normal kids, but somehow, they just sort of grow up on their own, and everyone knows they will. It's harder to love a retarded child. My daughter is retarded. Everyone thinks she looks ugly, and she walks funny, and talks funny, and sometimes has a funny look in her eyes. We know. But we love that child. There were times when I cursed the day she was born. But I learned. I learned what it was like for her being disadvantaged that way. And I became proud of her. At first I was self-conscious about how slow she was compared with other kids. It was years before she could do simple things like tie her shoelaces, and by the time she learned, other kids were reading difficult books and doing all kinds of math. But what my daughter did was a bigger accomplishment than what the other kids did. She tries hard. None of the other kids had to try so hard to get where they got. I used to break down and cry, watching my daughter try so many times to open a Coke bottle or something. Then I realized she was achieving— just more slowly than other kids. And then I began to realize also what an open, good-hearted person she was. One day I looked into her eyes and felt like I was looking right into her soul. It was beautiful. Suddenly I realized how much I had grown, myself, and how deep love had become in the struggle and the pain. Everyone wants normal children. My other kids are normal. But this daughter taught me the most. She taught me what love really means. I realized that the first time I really looked into her eyes.

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