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Village of Olde Forge West
6B21
Morristown, N.J. 07960
May 16, 1973

Secretary of Welfare, Helene Wohlgemuth
Harrisburg, Penna.

Dear Ms. Wohlgemuth:

I read with great interest the brief article about the situation at Polk State School and your action in firing the superintendent. There is of course more to the story than the article describes, but having been involved in working both with retarded children and with so-called delinquent children in Indiana and in Delaware, I have learned how to read a bit between the lines.

To the uninitiated, the idea of putting people in "pens" is horrifying. After working with such people, however, I came to the conclusion that if they were properly used such devices were far and away the most humane, for all concerned. If your child was assaulted by an ungovernable peer in such an institution, you would want the ungovernable child restrained. If your child was so destructive, you would hope that he could be retrained...and filling the child full of tranquillizers, isolating him entirely from others, or physically punishing him just doesn't retrain him properly.

I don't know Dr. McClelland, but it is certainly rare for both staff and patients to express such regard for the person at the top of an institution of this sort. It is a thankless job, at best. I saw many idealistic programs start, and fade away due to lack of money, understanding, cooperation, unity of staff purpose, education, etc. This in turn made many very good people quit in despair...everyone needs to see the results of their labors in some way, and when you deal with the retarded, you do not get thanks from them, as you might if you were a medical doctor who cured you of a painful ailment.

It was my conclusion that both restraint and retraining were equally needed in such institutions. But you can get surprises. In one institution for delinquents that I worked in, an "isolation cell" was kept as a "last resort" for inmates who failed to cooperate and appreciate the relatively open program. Within two weeks of opening the facility, we had to create two more of these cells because the boys begged to go in them to protect them from the more aggressive inmates who assaulted and raped the new boys as they arrived if they refused to "cooperate" and "submit" to their demands! So you have to really understand the situation before you jump to conclusions. An institution is NOT like an open society, and it never can be.

With best wishes for your success. I'm sure you are deeply dedicated to improving a sad situation. Sincerely,

Dorsey de Raismes

Ms. Dorsey de Raismes

in Medical World News