

The History of Special Education in the Late 1800s to Mid-1900s: A Look Through Beverly Schools

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Abstract

In my research, I discussed the history of special education through Beverly. The history in Beverly is primarily focused in the early 1900s. The first individual help provided for disabled children was in 1913. Although this seems early, it was behind other schools and institutions. Although there was little evidence in records, students must have been sent to special institutions before the establishment of classes. Beverly did not have much specialized education compared to other schools in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Full special education classes were not established until the law of 1931 required the teaching of atypical children. Once Beverly became completely involved, they did well in helping children and placing them in the appropriate classes. The tools I used to prove this are the Beverly school committee reports from 1897 through 1951. I also used SPED tests taken in the 1940s through 1950s helping to test for specific disabilities and appropriate placement for the children. I also used other city and state school reports and National Education Association journals and proceedings.

Although there is not much written on the history of special education previously, I did find some books dealing with aspects of the history. One is For "Children Who Vary from the Normal Type": Special Education in Boston, 1883-1930 by Robert Osgood, which I was unable to use. Another is Special Education in America : It's Legal and Governmental Foundations edited by Ballard, Ramirez and Weintraub, which deals with litigation history. This source was only slightly useful because it was based primarily on more recent history. There are also other sources that deal with the other aspects of special education, however very few have anything to do with the history. By discovering the history of special education in Beverly, I provided an understanding of one aspect of Beverly's past in education. It shows Beverly's involvement and how up to date they were for the time period compared to other schools in the country.

Special education may be something society takes for granted in this modern era; however, schools did not always have education for children with special needs. Today's school systems have progressed greatly to provide schools with classes and teachers for children with disabilities. Beginning with education for the deaf and blind in the mid to late 1800s, special education increased and evolved into helping the mentally deficient and physically crippled by the 1930s.

In Kentucky, the first state school for the deaf was established in 1823, and soon after, other state schools were established for the deaf and blind. In 1852, the state of Pennsylvania gave funding to a private school to educate mentally retarded children. President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill into law creating Gallaudet College, which was an institution of higher learning for the deaf. This forced the federal government to become involved in special education in 1864. In 1869, Boston established the first public day school for the deaf. Toward the end of the century, Providence, Rhode Island, established classes for mentally retarded children and Chicago, Illinois, established classes for the physically handicapped and blind. [1] Into the next century many more schools, developed special education classes throughout the country, including Beverly.

There are no records of special education in Beverly in the 19th century. The first mention of any special students was not until 1897 and 1898 where deaf mutes were listed in the school census charts of the Annual School Committee Reports. [2] Also in 1898, a new grading system was created, helping to promote each student at his or her own progress rate. This system showed the acknowledgment of both duller and brighter students in Beverly schools. Over the next few years, very little progress was made in the Beverly School system. In the early 1900s, the evidence for special help in Beverly occurred when several students were sent to the Feeble Minded School at Waverly. Two students in 1901, one in 1905, and another in 1910 were sent by the truant officer, N. S. Heron. [3]

Beverly gave no particular attention to students with special needs until 1913. In the School Committee Report, the Superintendent of Schools, S. Howard Chace, mentions the employment of “coach teachers” [4] in school buildings, which were seen as crowded. (See [Appendix A](#)) They were employed specifically to assist students who found their schoolwork difficult and also to encourage more gifted students in order for them to skip a grade, if possible. In the following year, 1914, Chace suggested the development of classes specifically for mentally retarded or deficient students. He also suggested the employment of coach teachers in all school buildings. Chace includes in his report an excerpt from a bulletin of the United States Bureau of Education, which states the ranks and types of children. The bulletin reads that there are five types of children in a school building; the lowest are those who should be treated in an institution; next the feeble-minded; then thirdly, the mentally sound, but slow children; fourthly the students who make normal progress, and finally bright and talented children in the highest grouping. [5] (See [Appendix B](#))

Beverly began to make significant progress in 1915, because of Chace’s suggestions in 1914. Three classes for atypical children were established: one in the Washington school, and two in the South-Edwards district. The Junior Manual Training classes were developed for poorly adjusted students. Those students who were once having trouble in class enjoyed their schoolwork and improved, according to the School Committee Report for that year. [6] The first half of the students’ school day consisted of regular schoolwork, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. The second half of the day was devoted to handiwork. The girls would do housework, such as sewing and cooking, while the boys would work with wood, to produce furniture and other household items. In 1916, a separate building, Pleasant View, would accommodate these J.M.T. classes, which were run by Aimie A. Woodbury, and Mrs. Clara W. Andrew. The principal was Mabel A. Matthews.

Although Beverly was involved in this activity early in the 20th century, other schools and states had initiated systems of special education more than fifty years previous to 1913. Institutions were being initiated in the early and mid-1800s especially for the education of the feeble minded. The Massachusetts State School for the Feeble-Minded was established in Waltham in the 1850s. The terms of admission were stated as for children between the ages of eight and twelve and not of epileptic or insane nature. The child and parents were to fill out an application and pay a boarding fee. [7] This document is helpful in determining the male to female ratio of students, and also the number of students receiving aid for attending of the school (see [Appendix C](#)). In 1898, the National Education Association Journal of Proceedings and Addresses had its first gathering of teachers from the Department of the Deaf, Blind and Mentally Deficient. The closing address was expressed by Alexander Graham Bell in Washington D. C. He states:

It is the first time that we have recognized that the instruction of these classes is a department of education. Now for the first time we came in an organized manner as an integral part of the great educational organization of this country, the great educational organization of the world. [8]

Not only were state schools being established, but also local public schools became involved in the education of mentally retarded children. In New York, in 1911, the Board of Education established special ungraded classes for students who were unable to progress in regular classes. One hundred twenty-five classes were established that year in the Greater New York area and about two thousand students were cared for in those classes. Tests were given to determine the grade and character training needed for each child. From these classes, children improved in their articulation, muscular control and use of “benumbed faculties.” [9]

In 1919, the Connecticut public school system was not as fully effective as it was required to be. Much like Beverly, the cities in Connecticut did not have a high number of classes for exceptional children. (see [Appendix D](#)) This shows the estimated number

of mentally deficient students, the requisite of special classes, and the actual number of established classes. When looking at this chart, one can see that the actual number of classes established in each city is much less than what is required for the number of students. A report for public schools in 1919 states the purpose of public school involvement. “The public school care of the feeble minded is in harmony with the social evolution of elementary education. It is the destiny of the public school to develop into a clearing house agency for the discovery of all children who, when adults may prove socially dependent.” [10]

To further the education of special children, a law was established in 1931 that towns with ten or more mentally retarded children had to establish special classes (see [Appendix E](#)).

Chapter 71, section 46, General Laws, as amended by Acts of 1922, chapter 231: The school committee of every town shall annually ascertain, under regulations prescribed by the department and commissioner of mental diseases, the number of children three years or more retarded in mental development in attendance upon its public schools or of school age and resident therein. At the beginning of each school year, the committee of every town where there are ten or more such children shall establish special classes for their instruction according to their mental attainments, under regulations prescribed by the department. [11]

Other aspects of the law stated that all children must be examined and then all those found mentally retarded three or more years must be re-examined at least every two years. All those children found to be mentally retarded must attend an assigned special class. Attendance was required; the class must not overextend eighteen students and only students who will profit from the classes may attend. The student must not be harmful to other students, there must be at east two hours a day of handwork, and finally the teachers must have had access to the records of the exams. [12]

Once this law developed, Beverly embraced special education. Hannah C. Strandal was hired as the Instructor of Crippled Children that year. In 1931, there were seventeen

students attending the class; seven of them were permanently crippled. In Ms. Strandal's annual (see [Appendix F](#)), she mentions the visit of S. Howard Chace, Superintendent of Schools, which shows the involvement Beverly had in the education of special children. Each year after 1931, the School Committee Reports included Ms. Strandal's report for that year. In her 1933 report, she lists the number of students and their disabilities.

During the year, twenty-one different children have been under my care. The following is a list with the disability-- 2 Infantile Paralysis, 5 Cardiac, 1 Cerebral Palsy, 1 Congenital Deformity, 2 Chorea, 1 Mastoiditis, 3 Broken Legs, 1 Burns, 1 Asthma, 2 Epilepsy, 2 Mentally Deficient. [13]

This shows that there was a wide variety for which students were being cared. The classes became involved with many aspects of life. The class took field trips, wrote and published a newspaper, and visited other students.

Speech Improvement Classes had been developed and, by 1936, a full teacher was hired. In that year, thirty-seven students were members of those classes. The types of speech being helped were retarded speech, stammering, lisping, tongue tied, and poor speech caused by malformation of the speech organs. [14] Overall, the special classes had improved the lives of the students. The reason of the classes was to help those students in need in order for them to return to their normal schooling. Of course, the classes were also used to help permanently crippled students. In her 1936 report, Ms. Strandal acknowledged the type of student with whom she worked.

One of our members, a boy who, after a struggle of seven years, has just learned to use crutches, was asked at Thanksgiving time for what he had to be thankful. Without a hesitation, he replied, "I am thankful I can walk." This is the typical of the bravery and courage of our handicapped children with whom I am privileged to work. [15]

Ms. Strandal, in all of her reports, has good news for the report of the Crippled children classes. The children were taught in such a way that they enjoyed learning and wanted to succeed. Throughout the years of the special classes, the number of students differed

from year to year. The Speech Improvement Classes had a higher attendance rate than the crippled classes did in each year. The speech classes were open to all students with speech disabilities, not only those in the crippled classes. Both classes helped to improve Beverly's involvement in special education.

By 1944, a new testing program became available not only to place students in special classes, but also to help guide them into the right vocation, or pathway in life, which included aptitude and skill testing. The testing program then progressed to be used for analysis in teacher instruction. Most of these tests were used to determine IQ and mental retardation. The tests showed a full assessment of the child and sometimes required a family background when needed. The test givers gave their reactions, advice, and recommendations for the child. The child was then placed in the correct grouping, such as dull, dull-normal, average, borderline intelligence, bright, or other groupings.

Many of the children were placed in the appropriate class for them. For many, the recommendations were to receive special attention and repeat a grade. Several students were referred to the Junior Manual Training program; others received coach teachers, or tutors. Some needed special help in certain areas of study and were to be watched closely. Some of the tests used were the WISC, Stanford- Binet (see [Appendix G](#) and [Appendix H](#)), California Achievement tests, Stanford Achievement Test Form D, E, G & H, California Test of Personality: Personal and Social Adjustment, California Reading (see [Appendix I](#)), and other testing forms. All of these tests were helpful in the diagnosis and treatment of children with special needs.

Eventually, Beverly established a strong special education department, which continues today. The city was neither the first nor the last city in the United States to form special education classes. When Beverly discovered the actions to take toward special education, it approached them with ease, hired the appropriate teachers and persons to improve

education in general for disabled students. Beverly's classes helped to improve the lives of children in need and still continue to help today.

Works Cited

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Footnotes

[1] Joseph Ballard, Bruce A. Ramirez, and Frederick J. Weintraub, eds., *Special Education in America: Its Legal and Governmental Foundations* (Reston, Virginia: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1982), 1.

[2] Beverly Annual School Committee Reports, 1897 & 1898. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).

[3] Beverly Annual School Committee Reports, 1901, 1905, & 1910. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).

[4] Beverly School Committee Report, 1913, 13. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).

[5] Beverly School Committee Report, 1914, 16. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).

[6] Beverly School Committee Report, 1915, 14. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).

[7] Annual Report of the Mass State School for the Feeble Minded, 1889, 28.

[8] Alexander Graham Bell, "Closing Address," *NEA Journal of Proceedings and Addresses*, Washington D. C. (1898)

[9] New York Board of Education "The Feeble Minded in New York," 1911.

[10] Arnold Gesell, MD. *Special Provisions for Exceptional Children*, 1919, 55.

[11] Beverly School Committee Report, 1931, 168. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).

[12] *Ibid.* 169.

[13] Beverly School Committee Report, 1933, 25. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).

[14] *Ibid.* 26

[15] Beverly School Committee Report, 1936, 23. [Beverly Educational Archives](#).