

# “Where are the Children?”: The New Data Game at HEW

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by Geoffrey O’Gara

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It is Dr. Edwin Martin’s ninth year as Deputy Education Commissioner for the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH), and, to the outsider, things seem to be going well. Since 1973 BEH has grown from a small research bureau into the third largest agency in HEW’s Department of Education, and its mission—doling out federal grants to the states to pay for the education of handicapped children—seems to insure it of a long life and ample budget. It is hard, after all, to be against education for the handicapped. Parents are for it. Teachers are for it. Congressmen must be for it—they can’t afford to be pictured as bullying blind kids or kids in wheelchairs. And Martin has made sure of these political truths—working hard to build a militant constituency among the people his agency serves, courting the press and toadying up to senators, lacing his congressional testimony with references to the research grants that have been steered to the states of the legislators who hold the gavel. He has done a thorough job, and he can be proud of the results: \$800 million in annual aid sent to the states, a varied roster of research projects underway with BEH backing, and the general approval both of the lobbying groups that represent the handicapped, and the Congress—which has repeatedly given BEH more funding than the president’s budget requested.

But there is a problem that has been

nagging at Dr. Martin. He has returned to it, again and again, but it remains unsolved. You see, when the “Handicapped Bill of Rights” (as the National Education for All Handicapped Children Act was called) passed Congress in 1975, certain projections had been made. Specifically, BEH had put together a “panel of experts” to estimate how many handicapped kids there were in U.S. schools. Relying heavily on an HEW survey of clinics, schools, and state agencies—as well as studies commissioned by BEH from non-profit groups like the Council for Exceptional Children—the experts came back with a figure of 12 per cent. And BEH told Congress that, indeed, 12 per cent of America’s school-age children probably needed “special education”—they had hearing and vision problems, speech impairments, emotional difficulties, mental retardation, orthopedic defects, or the generalized “learning disabilities.” That 12 per cent figure had an intoxicating effect on congressmen, who actually wrote into the law books estimates of the handicapped population based on the BEH projection. The notion that there were millions of undiscovered, untreated handicapped kids out there in the schools became the rallying cry for an expanded BEH.

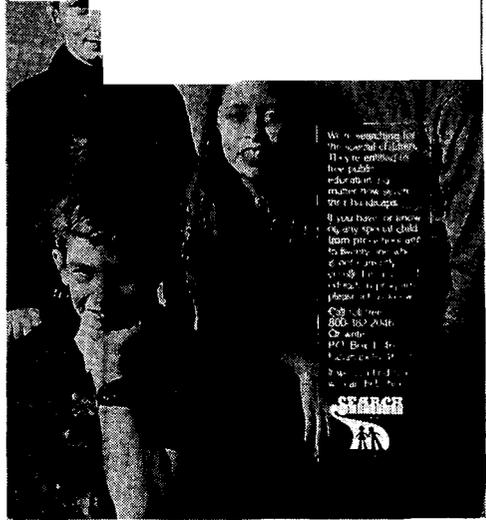
Dr. Martin’s problem is, now that BEH and the states have been counting handicapped children for five years, that the number of handicapped kids is falling way below expectations. No state can find the projected 12 per

cent—indeed, the states are reporting that an average of only *seven* per cent of their students need special education. Some states are even reporting that nearly 95 per cent of their school-age population is perfectly normal, handicap-wise. Figures like these spell potential disaster to Dr. Martin in his efforts to solve the handicapped problem. For example, budget cutters in the OMB might seize on the handicapped shortfall as an excuse to keep BEH's funding below the authorized levels.

Almost a year ago, with figures still lagging despite BEH efforts, Dr. Martin decided something had to be done, so he called a retreat. Not a tactical withdrawal, but the more common form of retreat—a meeting. Martin and his staff repaired to a motel in Fredericksburg to ponder the crisis in statistics. There, an aide would later describe it, they “met for two days, away from the building and telephones, to discuss our feelings about what these findings mean and what should be done about them.”

After long hours of discussion, they came up with their answer: it was time to crank up “Project Childfind.” The reasoning behind the plan is familiar—the “childcount” means as much to BEH as rising crime rates meant to J. Edgar Hoover. But in this case, the logic is particularly incongruous, and the costs, in human terms, potentially great.

As Martin described the “childfind” campaign in a January memo, BEH would “refocus its operations so as to concentrate on the priority of making sure all handicapped children were appropriately served.” The states weren't locating the promised 12 per cent, so BEH itself would have to drum them up. The first prong of the operation was a letter, sent to state education officials in January, expressing disappointment with the numbers of handicapped children they were producing. While the letter allowed skeptically that “it remains possible” that a state *might* find only eight or nine per cent of its school kids



handicapped, it admitted to nothing lower than that. And states that persistently report low “childcounts” have found themselves pressured by BEH in subtle ways. Long and difficult negotiations have dragged on as state officials attempting to get approval for federal funding are pushed to put more effort and money into “childfind.” States with low childcounts get reminders from BEH that they are being watched, sometimes audited, for the flaws in their programs.

The second phase of Childfind was a barrage of memos to BEH's “grantees,” the various researchers in universities around the country who receive special BEH funding to work on projects in “special ed.” The memo encouraged them to do what they could to support BEH's “renewed emphasis” on turning up more children with learning impediments. The nominal work of the grantees—which might be anything from improvisational theater to building models of daycare centers for the handicapped—was to be supplemented by a more basic, emergency activity: uncovering the elusive handicapped kids concealed in their communities. The goal of 12 per cent handicapped could be reached if only everyone would pitch in.

As the final prong of BEH's attack, a vigorous campaign has been launched in the media asking “Where are the children?,” and urging parents of the handicapped to assert their rights.

Martin is adamant that 12 per cent is a proper target for his campaign. He admits the figure is "unscientific," but emphasizes the projections "have a long history, and it's been a very stable history." The figure, he said, "comes from a variety of sources." But it turns out that some of the studies on which BEH's original "experts" had relied were not models of accuracy. "We didn't examine the data very closely," one Hill staff member recalls of the central HEW statistics, "and we found out later we were multi-counting kids." In other words, if a child limped and spoke with a lisp, the HEW survey counted him twice. If he suffered from several handicaps, he had filled up an entire classroom on the charts.

Since the states first began reporting children with handicaps to BEH, no new study has been made to determine if the original 12 per cent figure was accurate—in fact, two studies funded by BEH concluded that the state counts were more accurate than any system BEH might devise to check on them. The 12 per cent figure, says New York's Special Education Director Lou Grumet, "is built on water."

But BEH is not about to give up its 12 per cent without a fight. The figure has, as Martin says, a long history. And Martin has dozens of charts, showing variances in the data among localities, to support his stand. Massachusetts, for example, is one of Martin's prize states. Massachusetts had no less than ten per cent of its school age population in special education programs from 1977 to 1978. If one state can come up with that many handicapped kids, Martin asks, why can't others?

Checking with Massachusetts officials and other special ed specialists, however, turns up a few of the secrets of that state's success in the "childfind" sweepstakes. Massachusetts' standards for identifying the handicapped, it seems, are "functional"—that is, if a student fails in school, he qualifies for special education. He may have failed because he was lazy, or because he was out stealing hubcaps, but he makes it

into the "handicapped" group anyway. It also turns out that at least 10,000 of the Massachusetts kids listed as "school-aged handicapped" in BEH's tables aren't school-aged at all—they are aged three to five or 18 to 21. Excluding these kids would drop the total at least one per cent and drop Massachusetts out of the select group of states that can claim double-digit handicapped.

So there may be a quite simple reason why BEH has had such a hard time finding kids who are supposed to be floundering unrecognized in the schools. They aren't there. They never were there. Even the Council on Exceptional Children, whose own studies contributed to the original 12 per cent projection, is ready to abandon it. "Let's live with the numbers we've got," says Joe Ballard of CEC's legislative office. "We don't like this going out there and pounding the table and saying let's get 12 per cent, because then, God knows, we start counting the barn doors."

The "barn door" problem is what makes the "childfind" effort so perverse. It seems BEH is looking for its big childcount increases in four "grey" categories: "learning disabilities," speech and hearing problems, emotional disturbances, and mental retardation. As BEH Commissioner Martin admits, such classifications often require "judgment" calls, and standards vary. One man's retarded student might merely be another's candidate for remedial reading. So, as BEH pushes for ever higher childcounts, and pressures states into ever more inclusive "special education" programs, it runs a risk greater than that of wasting federal dollars—it risks slapping labels on children that can never be shaken off.

In particular, some states in the South appear to throw large numbers of minority children into the "mentally retarded" category. In Alabama, and in North and South Carolina, BEH records for the 1977-78 school year show thousands more students classified as mentally retarded than even BEH's generous predictions

would lead one to expect. And in Mississippi, according to the Children's Defense Fund, black children are classified as mentally retarded at three times the rate of white children. Few educators will discuss the problem on the record, but many will privately acknowledge that, since minorities generally perform poorly on such "intelligence" measures as standard IQ tests, there is a risk—particularly in southern border states and large urban centers—that a school system might "dump" minority students into the ambiguous categories. In the Southwest, as well, a Spanish-speaking youth could easily be labeled "learning disabled" when all he needs is a few courses in English.

Martin says that BEH warns the states against "overclassification." But the Bureau's actions belie these warnings. Texas, for example, classified almost four per cent of its schoolchildren as "learning disabled" in 1977-78. That's about 27,000 more kids than BEH's own projections of three per cent would predict. But instead of raising questions about all those "LD" kids, BEH is raising a ruckus because Texas registered a slight drop of 9,000 students in its overall handicapped total.

BEH does face some obstacles in its battle with the states. Frequently, state schools can get more federal aid if they connect a student's problems in school to economic deprivation, rather than physical or mental handicap. As one education lobbyist described the process: "With Title One [of the Elementary and Secondary School Act] money, I might call a kid language disordered. If I want BEH money, I might call the child learning disabled. . . . There are policies, state and local, which make an absolute separation. You can't serve them under both." In the childcount bidding, BEH sometimes finds itself competing with other federal programs that provide more money, with fewer strings and less paperwork involved.

Even those states that can resist BEH's financial power must contend with Martin's absolute mastery of the

rhetoric of handicapped rights. I caught a glimpse of what they're up against myself when I mentioned to Martin that one California special ed teacher had told me the "childcount" drive was throwing his state's progressive four-year "Master Plan" out of kilter. Martin immediately responded, "I'm astonished that anyone in a responsible position would say that. It has not been [California's] position to soft-pedal kids' rights." As I said, you don't want to be on the wrong side of this issue.

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### A Man With A Goal

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If Dr. Martin's agency could content itself with pursuing the magical 12 per cent figure by the time-honored, and relatively inexpensive, techniques of statistical warfare—"multi-counting," lax bookkeeping, and simple fraud—the results wouldn't be so bad. Unfortunately, BEH seeks to have its preferred statistics actually reflected in reality, and by attempting to bend the real world to fit its projections, BEH raises the possibility of unnecessarily burdening children with exactly what handicapped activists seek to eliminate—a "stigmatizing" label. The agency will most certainly expend a great deal of time and money on posters and research grants to produce higher numbers, money that might be better spent improving the *quality* of "special education" for those with an unambiguous need for it.

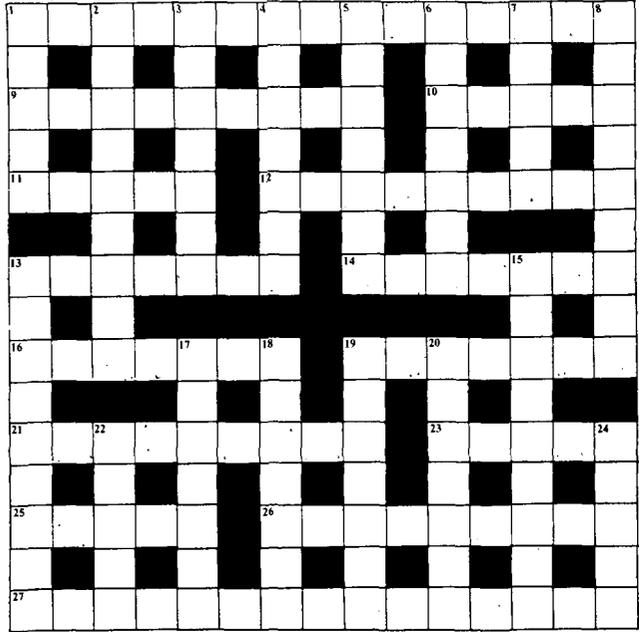
Despite the competition of other grants peddlers, and the outright resistance of many states, "Project Childfind" may yet succeed. BEH is set on its course; it has the power of the purse, and the federal soapbox. Who knows—with advanced techniques, one day the majority of our children may be discovered to have one "learning disability" or another. Dr. Martin is a skilled and determined man—determined to scour America for any child suffering from a physical or mental handicap. The more of them he finds, the happier he will be. ■

# the political puzzle

by John Barclay

## ACROSS

1. Radio and TV cite Eric Mondale awkwardly. (10,5)
9. Carter takes 499 in gift. (9)
10. Some seats may be capital. (5)
11. Flower found in Camelot usually. (5)
12. Discards wild tutor show. (6,3)
13. Put Colorado in for example, why it is a modern study. (7)
14. Earned red time mixture. (7)
16. Cuts short short time in bits. (7)
19. Crazy dadless seats. (7)
21. Bothered tender Tom badly. (9)
23. If big, it is a city? (5)
25. Work back to hold up Capone. (5)
26. Tax men fix up S.S. Ross Sea. (9)
27. Post times re: pawnlady spies displayed. (5,10)



## DOWN

1. In fact put out sex pelican-style. (5)
2. Choices from the Spanish notices translated. (9)
3. Rosetti managed attempts. (7)
4. Try love strangely in public. (7)
5. Perhaps remit in the meantime. (7)
6. A cat Farrow wore casually. (7)
7. Entertainment spot in first stages of discovery. (5)
8. Positions that almost turn out destitute. (9)
13. In trouble? Melt a debt, stir! (9)
15. Instrument he let open sloppily. (9)
17. Plainly makes 150 and 50 plus a year. (7)
18. Locate a rumpled tea suit. (7)
19. Cruel ones were somewhat staid in the ship. (7)
20. Israeli low point comes out as a deed. (4,3)
22. Teacher begins rabbit examination. (5)
24. Confusion sates bridge players? (5)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 9.