Virginia Parents Establish 'Schools' for Handicapped

Determined groups of northern Virginia parents currently are in the business of establishing "schools" for handicapped youngsters who have no place in the programs of the local public school systems.

There is happy laughter in the Crossman Methodist Church, Falls Church, as 25 children for the first time are having the fun of playing and working with others.

These preschool and school-age classes for children—some who cannot speak, some who cannot get their arms and legs to work properly—are operated by Help for Handicapped Children, Inc. This is a private parents' cooperative which organized to augment the work of a small county-supported school in the Episcopal Church Parish House.

In two rooms of St. Mary's Parochial School, Alexandria, little hands are busy as 30 youngsters, crippled and mentally retarded, smile into the faces of some very special people—teachers.

This is the project of parents from Alexandria and Fairfax County. The name of the volunteer school is Help for Handicapped Children.

In Arlington County, where the school system provides more facilities for the crippled and retarded child than any place else in the area, groups of parents are working to give the so-called unclassified boy and girl an educational break.

These organized parent groups did not spring up without cause. The Old Dominion does not grant financial assistance to the handicapped or exceptional child.

A first step to correct this situation was made in January when the Virginia Legislature appropriated money for a study of education and services available for handicapped children. Recently this special Governor's Legislative Commission began a series of hearings throughout Virginia.

The commission heard the oral testimony of northern Virginians at a session at Alexandria. Subsequently, the Northern Virginia Chapter, International Council for Exceptional Children, has forwarded a set of recommendations to the Governor's study team.

In general the proposals call for State money to set up regional services for the severely retarded child, the blind or deaf youngster; regional workshops for the child who always will need treatment and resident treatment homes for emotionally disturbed children. Local cities and counties could then use public funds to establish consolidated special schools for all the handicapped of the area.

It was recommended also that assistance be given organized parent groups who now are providing cooperative education programs, with a view to incorporating them in the public school program.

Until this day comes, such communities as Falls Church, Fairfax and Alexandria have stepped in to fill the gap.

In Falls Church, the Crossman Church gave space. The Wissinger Chevrolet Co. and Broad St. Ford Motor Co. gave two new station wagons to transport the handicapped to their classes. Police Chief Elliott Howe found alternate rescue squad drivers for one wagon and certified the mother of a pupil to drive the other. The Kiwanians and Lions pay the drivers McDaniel's Esso Service Center supplies the fuel for one vehicle. The winter fuel and light bills were paid by the Virginia Crippled Children's Society. The Women's Club of Falls Church provides a daily volunteer worker. It also gave a film strip projector. A variety of other groups have given cash, equipment and support.

In Alexandria, the collective project with Falls Church parents has drawn the use of a station wagon from C. Duane Cope, owner of Virginia Motor Sales. Classrooms were donated by St. Mary's Catholic School and redecorated and equipped by parents, merchants and civic groups. Estimated operating cost of the venture is $600 a month, to be contributed by the parent according to his means and donations. Tuition is $20. The school has two teachers and a speech therapist.

"When you get together and work in a group like this," one mother said, "you just thank God, that's all."