In the mid-nineteenth century, states began passing compulsory education laws that aimed to provide every child in America a common education. As these laws were gradually enforced in the following decades, school enrollments skyrocketed. Psychologists, teachers, and administrators became convinced that these increased enrollments had put traditional schooling in crisis. Leonard Ayres’ *The Laggard in Our Schools* (1909) gave that crisis definition by describing it in terms of the “over age” problem and the related “elimination” problem. Students were repeating grades, unable to advance through the curriculum, until students ranging from six to fourteen years old occupied first grade classes together. Demoralized over-age students then ‘eliminated’ themselves, leaving school to begin work without completing a standard course of education. Superintendents inspired by Ayres began studying their own districts and found wide-ranging percentages of retardation—children who were 2 years or more behind the standard grade level for their age—declaring anywhere between 7 and 75 percent of their students over age.2

In trying to educate everyone the same way, one superintendent asserted, schools had devoted themselves to “trying to make all children equal in mental power.” Subnormal children, whom he declared “waste products,” remained in first or second grade year after year, “clogging
our educational machinery”\textsuperscript{3} until they reached the age of fourteen and could legally leave school. Frightened and inspired by these studies, educators and administrators quickly decided that standard curricula and pedagogical methods could not succeed with this new diverse mass of children, some of whom spoke no English, while others had mental, moral, or physical impairments that made it difficult for them to keep up and made class order seemingly impossible to maintain. After World War I, attention shifted to students who were likewise being failed by the regular curriculum, not because it was beyond their capacity but because it was below it. By 1930, an array of ungraded classes took on ever-finer classifications of non-normative students. Among them were classes for the backward, delinquent, feeble-minded, gifted, and “crippled,” English-learning classes for new immigrants, sight-saving classes for those with impaired vision, open-air rooms for those with tuberculosis, and parent schools for students whose home environments were declared harmful. [From here on, I’ll be using ungraded as an overarching term to encompass all non-mainstream classrooms, gifted class to indicate classes for children deemed superior, and special class for children deemed inferior].

As medical inspections and psycho-educational clinics took hold in the first decades of the twentieth century, physicians, psychologists, and teachers jockeyed for the authority to identify students who required placement in an ungraded class. Intelligence tests seemed to offer a standardized, psychological solution to education’s sorting problem. Intelligence tests were first developed in France in 1905 by psychologists Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon with the hope they would identify students who required placement in special education. Henry Herbert Goddard, head of the research wing of a private institution for feebleminded children in

\textsuperscript{3} S.L. Heeter, “Medical Inspection in the Saint Paul Schools,” \textit{The Psychological Clinic} 3, No. 3 (1909): 63.
Vineland, New Jersey, published an English translation in 1910. The tests sorted various tasks according to the age at which a normal child could accomplish them. Results then identified those with abnormal development by comparing their chronological age to the grouping of tasks that were too difficult for them. In 1916, Lewis Terman popularized the “intelligence quotient,” which transformed this comparison into a single number, with 100 indicating exact alignment between mental and chronological age and a lower number indicating a lack of mental development.

Intelligence testing’s adaptation and application was slow and contested. Through debates over testing’s accuracy and ability to sort children into ungraded classes, experts, children, and their families tested the limits of segregation as a means for producing social and economic order. Historians of the early twentieth century have explored the ways that race- and class-based segregation featured in progressive politics. This chapter considers the ungraded class as a key arena of debate over segregation’s utility and implementation when applied to ability. It also examines how psychologists wrestled with the implications of ranking the nation’s population by intellectual capacity. As Goddard declared, the widespread adoption of

4 The actual translation was performed by one of Goddard’s assistants and most prominent field workers, Elizabeth Kite. She received credit in the publication, but over time her work has been subsumed under Goddard’s.


intelligence testing marked “the dawn of a new era in education” defined by “the passing of the time-worn tradition of the equality of men in the intellectual sense.” The purpose of compulsory education, historians have argued, was to “safeguard democracy,” but in combination with the technology of intelligence testing, it prompted a reconsideration of how a democracy might function when it could not rest on the “emotionally satisfying” but fundamentally false doctrine of human equality.9

Regardless of the mantra in the Declaration of Independence, which early-twentieth-century psychologists regularly referenced as a motto requiring revision, people living in the United States had of course never been treated equally. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson used plenty more ink justifying inequality than he had inscribing it in the nation’s founding documents.10 Through the nineteenth century, law, philosophy, and natural science used categories such as age, gender, class, and race, among others, to draw lines of competency that bounded the electorate and defined citizenship in exclusionary ways.11 The twentieth-century American psychologists who defined intelligence as an objective measurement of a person’s potential hoped it might replace unjust historic social prejudices with a just hierarchy of intellect.12 For example, Terman—a key figure in the rapid spread of testing in schools after World War I—believed one of the test’s major virtues was its ability to detect geniuses from poor backgrounds. Feminist psychologist Leta Stetter Hollingworth, meanwhile, used intelligence tests to argue for gender equality and ran experimental gifted classes that were gender-balanced and somewhat

9 Steffes; Hollingworth
10 Measure of merit
11 Carson, Measure of Merit; Welke, Law and the Borders of Belonging.
mixed ethnically and racially. The occasional exceptional child from a poor or racialized background provided cover for the ways the tests ultimately reinforced deeply rooted social inequalities. As consensus grew that curricula should be shaped to the needs and intelligence of the child, the low test scores of immigrants and other racialized minorities offered a color-blind justification for racially segregated education. This made it possible for educators to present predominately African-American schools as special schools, whose focus on vocational training was a positive curricular reform, not racial discrimination.

Clinical psychologists who worked closely with special class teachers developed a psycho-educational discourse that recognized how social prejudices had corrupted the development and use of intelligence tests to justify segregation in schools and institutions. This chapter uses the psychologist Lightner Witmer and the special class founder Elizabeth Farrell to trace the development of this diagnostic discourse, which emphasized how children’s environmental circumstances shaped their perceived mental and moral capacities and promoted a cautious approach to segregating mental difference. The special class was a flexible segregative space that channeled students into short- and long-term medical care for physical impairments; moved some out of their families and into private charitable boarding homes, supervised work appointments, or institutional care; and placed others back into their “normal” classrooms. Witmer’s diagnostic clinic was tied to the special class and used it as a “clearing house” and

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“laboratory.” There, long-term observation made possible the gradual development of a tentative diagnosis alongside more essential efforts to educate and improve individual pupils.\textsuperscript{15}

Witmer formed close relationships with disabled children, their parents, and especially with teachers in special classes, whose investment in each child was individual, intimate, and often hopeful. Special classes provided an extended period of observation before deciding a child’s degree of defect or potential for improvement, challenging the prevailing idea that a single examination or intelligence test could yield an accurate and permanent diagnostic label. Additionally, special class teachers treated their pupils as dynamic learners whose abilities could be expanded if given proper instruction and enough time. That decision, rooted in their hope to return some of their students to mainstream classrooms, cultivated a focus on individual improvement over scientific psychology’s mission to construct strict and static diagnostic classifications. Perhaps most importantly, while eugenicists began “framing the moron” as an inherently amoral criminal “menace” responsible for most of society’s crime and vice, special class teachers asserted that feebleminded children could be taught moral behavior.\textsuperscript{16}

More theoretically-oriented psychologists such as Goddard, Terman, and Hollingworth spent the 1910s focused on broad surveys and the development of standardized categories of diagnosis, necessarily spending less time with the individual children they studied. They adopted more static ideas about children’s abilities, placing their faith in IQ as an unchanging measure of a child’s maximum potential and advocating institutionalization and sterilization for the feebleminded. After World War I, implementing these negative eugenic measures seemed increasingly unfeasible. Intelligence tests administered to recruits had found a shockingly high

\textsuperscript{15} Ferguson, “Creating the Continuum,” 92.
number of them were feebleminded, far more than could ever be institutionalized. These scientific psychologists remained loyal advocates of testing’s objectivity, but responded to this roadblock by directing their attention away from institutionalization and the feebleminded to instead pursue the study and education of the gifted. This transition formed the leading edge of a broad cultural and psycho-medical shift toward positive eugenic ideas and policies.17

In the summer of 1911, Lightner Witmer organized an experimental special class in connection with his psychological clinic, which was housed in the psychology department of the University of Pennsylvania. He had founded the clinic in 1896, after a formative encounter with a teacher who insisted that if psychology could not fix her case of a “chronic bad speller,” what was it good for?18 This educator convinced him that “if psychology was worth anything” its worth would come, not from theoretical or philosophical advances, but in “the value and amount of its contributions to the advancement of the human race.” Those contributions, Witmer decided, were best made toward pedagogically retarded children who, if found and helped early enough, might be recovered as future producers and leaders. Helping every child reach their maximum potential regardless of their “stage of individual development” was the charge of a practical, valuable, and professional psychology.19 Witmer’s placement of all children on a scale of development that had “no sharp line” between the pathological and normal made space for psychology to cater to all children, including the normal and gifted, as the field indeed would with child guidance clinics in the 1920s and 1930s. Still, the Clinic worked primarily with

17 As Alexandra Minna Stern has pointed out, the negative-positive eugenics binary is an overly simplified way to understand eugenic ideas and policies in the twentieth century. Because this chapter’s historical subjects referred to their own work using this binary, I replicate it here to explain how they perceived and explained their shifting priorities, not as a theoretical concept.
19 Ibid. [Witmer, “Clinical Psychology.”]
subnormal children whose slowed mental processes, Witmer claimed, could be more easily studied and then applied to a theory of normal mental development.\textsuperscript{20} After a decade of work diagnosing and treating Philadelphia schoolchildren and running small summer schools with truant and delinquent boys, Witmer established a journal, \textit{The Psychological Clinic}, in which to publish clinical studies similarly engaged in practical questions of education, retardation, and feeblemindedness.

In 1911, he had enough funding to run a full-sized course, where psychology students and special class teachers-in-training observed the clinical evaluation and instruction of eighteen children of varying mental abilities and (im)moral histories, all of whom had been selected from the Clinic’s examination records. Witmer brought Elizabeth Farrell to lead the classroom instruction. As the founder and inspector of New York public schools’ Department of Ungraded Classes, Farrell was one of the United States’ foremost experts in special education, a resident of Lillian Wald’s Henry Street Settlement Home, and a fierce advocate for the expansion of special classes in public schools.\textsuperscript{21} Witmer and Farrell were natural allies. They each saw the other’s field as a valuable partner in their own field’s professionalization. For Witmer, whereas the limited number of psychology jobs in universities and clinics threatened to limit his profession’s reach, teachers represented an endless opportunity. “Of all classes in the community whom we desire to reach,” Witmer wrote, “the teachers are the most important.”\textsuperscript{22} Farrell, meanwhile, believed that studying psychology would help ungraded teachers establish themselves as authorities in relation to their principals, mainstream teachers, and most importantly, students’

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\textsuperscript{22} Lightner Witmer, Elizabeth Farrell, and Arthur Holmes, \textit{The Special Class for Backward Children} (Philadelphia: Psychological Clinic Press, 1911), 9.
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parents. “If the parents see that you know more about the child than they do,” Farrell instructed the teachers observing Witmer’s summer school, “they will trust you.” Proving one’s grounding in psychology, then, was a key asset for teachers negotiating student placements, curricular design, and learning goals with resistant parents.

The importance of environment and possibility of cure were central to both Witmer and Farrell’s approaches to backward and feebleminded children. At their intake evaluations, the summer class’s students displayed a mix of physical, mental, and moral defects of varying severity. In their initial condition, most of them, Witmer reported, seemed unlikely to grow up to “maintain themselves satisfactorily by their own exertions, or to marry and rear normal children.” Before the class began, physicians identified vision and hearing impairments and corrected them as much as possible. Social workers visited every child’s home to determine whether they had adequate moral oversight and supervision. One third of the students were removed from their homes and boarded with vetted caretakers. Through a summer of medical treatment, wholesome diets and home life, rigorous daily physical exercise alongside individualized, psychologically-informed academic training, Witmer and Farrell reported that the whole class became healthier, more moral, more disciplined, and improved in their studies.

Farrell’s commitment to curability was rooted in the ideas and methods of the mid-nineteenth century’s leaders in the study and treatment of feeblemindedness. The original founders of institutions for the feebleminded had been optimistic about their ability to educate the feebleminded and send them back into their communities as improved, if not cured, citizen-

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23 Ibid, [Special Class for Backward Children], 167.
24 The distinction between backward and feebleminded was generally that backward connoted a status in school (ie backward in one’s studies) and carried fewer associations with moral defect than feeblemindedness did.
25 Special Class for Backward Children, 1.
workers. Superintendents of the nation’s first institutions adopted Edward Seguin’s “physiological method,” which used physical exercise to restore the will that he believed the feebleminded lacked. “The working hand makes strong the working brain,” the motto went. Seguin’s method had fallen short of expectations, leaving superintendents increasingly pessimistic and resigned to expanding custodial wings at the expense of their educational endeavors in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Yet the Seguin method and its pursuit of cure lived on in the methods and ideas of special class teachers. Discussing why the special class devoted so much time to physical activity and “sense training,” Farrell explained that it was rooted in Seguin’s pedagogy and his belief “that in every feebleminded child there is some potentiality of normality.” She recognized that many psychologists and physicians had moved on from his ideas but insisted that the theoretical debates of those fields needn’t affect the daily practice of teachers. “Whether or not Dr. Seguin was right, doesn’t concern us. What does concern us is that these children are living in the world” and as teachers they were tasked with improving them. One teacher-in-training inquired, what do to with the incorrigible or hopeless case? As for incorrigibility, Farrell questioned “whether there is such a thing as an incorrigible boy.” A boy whose energies were directed properly, whose attention was lured to the school and away from the street, would quickly shed signs of incorrigibility and become an upstanding pupil. As for hopeless cases, she declared those rare, and warned against deciding “too hastily, or too superficially” that a child was unimprovable. She encouraged her teachers-in-training to take hope and to watch for the

27 Farrell “Round Table Discussions with Student Observers” *The Special Class for Backward Children*, 161.
smallest signs of progress. “While there is life there is hope. We cannot grow a second arm, but in the developing mind, who can tell what is going to happen?”

Special teachers regarded themselves as crucial contributors to the science of child study. They were devoted to individualized experimentation, to recording their methods and results, and to doing their part to render education more efficient. The editors of *Ungraded* declared the special class teacher “a scientist,” who “stands for the triumph of Modernity, for the final establishment of the individual in society.”28 This emphasis on the individual was foundational to their pedagogy and their conceptualization of mental and moral defects. It also aligned with broader trends in education inspired by John Dewey and similar educational reformers, who argued for smaller classes and the end of rote, recitation-based learning. This individualized science also led to conflict with scientific psychology’s efforts to devise broad classificatory schema and assign diagnoses based on short examinations and intelligence tests.

These tensions were revealed in Henry Herbert Goddard’s criticism of New York City’s ungraded classes in 1912, Farrell’s subsequent defense of the system she had built, and a series of letters to the editor in the *New York Times* in which community members debated whether city officials should provide ungraded education with more resources or devote all their funds and attention to expanding institutional care. Goddard was head of the research department at a private institution in Vineland, New Jersey. His work adapting Binet tests to American schoolchildren had won him recognition as a well-respected psychologist and eugenicist. He was also responsible for coining and popularizing the diagnostic category of “moron,” a label for people with mild mental defect who, he argued, were innately criminal and if allowed to reproduce would pass their hereditary defect on to future generations. The most troubling

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28 “Editorial,” *Ungraded* 1, No 2 (June 1915): 131.
characteristic of the moron, according to Goddard, was that they were largely able to pass as normal and therefore escaped most methods of identification and institutionalization. He advocated the widespread use of Binet tests, the lone method capable of identifying morons so they could be committed to institutional care before indulging their criminal and sexual instincts. The New York Bureau of Education turned to him to evaluate their school system’s approach to subnormal children.

After administering intelligence tests to a sample of New York schoolchildren, many of them already in special classes, Goddard confidently generalized from his earlier study of New Jersey students to declare that 2% of the city’s schoolchildren were incurably mentally defective, and that ungraded classes and their teachers were woefully inadequate to meet this challenge. Goddard declared that the teachers were broadly untrained and failed to keep records. Misdiagnosis ran rampant throughout the ungraded system, keeping countless children in school when they required lifelong institutionalization. He identified with disdain teachers’ efforts “to get some of these children back into the grades,” mocking the very purpose that many special educators believed they served. These teachers were sentimentals, not scientists.

Goddard and Farrell held conflicting visions of the ideal organization of ungraded classes, particularly over the benefits, drawbacks, and appropriate extent of segregated education itself. Goddard regarded the special class as a holding tank for children on waiting lists for the institutional life they would ultimately require. He also proposed that children deemed subnormal should be sent to entirely separate schools rather than to separate classrooms within mainstream schools. This would prevent even the slightest interaction with “normal” classes and would collect enough subnormal children to divide them into more precise grades. Over time, he envisioned these schools holding their students for “as many hours as possible,” even overnight,
transforming into city-based institutions gradually enough to avoid parental objections. Farrell rejected this organization out of hand, arguing that by virtue of its separateness, such a system “differentiates, sets aside, classifies, and of necessity, stigmatizes the pupils whom it receives.”

Avoiding that stigma mattered not only for the well-being and self-esteem of the segregated students themselves, but because parents were less likely to allow their child to be put in a special class if it seemed humiliating and permanent. As long as separated students were educated in the same building, special classes could be framed as a logical extension of the increasingly individualized curriculum that characterized all progressive education. Segregation was therefore only appropriate for instruction itself.

For educational reformers, the most important reason to segregate subnormal students was the perceived benefit for the “normal” students who would be freed from the distraction of their classmates. This reasoning echoed similar efforts underway, especially in cities, to ban “unsightly beggars” from public space. These “ugly laws” asserted the right of the nondisabled to be free from seeing or hearing disabled people in their day-to-day lives. They also reflected the fear that impairments were, in a certain sense, contagious. Pregnant women feared that encountering disfigured or disabled people would harm their unborn child; indeed, mothers regularly reported that being “shocked” by such a person in pregnancy had caused their child’s impairment. Parents suspected that if their children entered special classrooms they’d be “‘dragged down’ mentally and morally.”

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30 Schweik, The Ugly Laws.
31 Elwyn Idiocy and Description Blanks-Need to look up specific examples
Elwyn that her son had heard “if he was at Elwyn long enough he would get feeble minded. He is very sensitive and it worries him.” Special education leaders reported in frustration that principals and mainstream teachers often threatened placement in a special class for day-to-day misbehavior or slacking, leveraging students’ fear of “low-grade” children and the stigma of associating with them.

Farrell pushed back against these trends. Rather than treating stigma and conflict between normal and subnormal students as inevitable and total separation therefore necessary, she argued that normal students would actually benefit from interacting with non-normative students on playgrounds, in hallways, lunchrooms, and on the commute to and from school. These relationships would teach the crucial lesson that subnormal children’s “mental power is the same as theirs, only of less degree.” Moreover, the children in special classes often had talents in manual work. When intelligent children who were “in danger of being pseudo-intellectual snobs” observed the excellence of what other students produced with their hands, they would learn that “this group of ‘different’ children has contributions to make to the life of the school no less valuable because they are unlike.” Even if these efforts at normalization fell short, Farrell argued that students should learn early on the (decidedly non-eugenic) “obligation of the strong to the weak.”

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33 Letter to Martin Barr from Mrs. M.K. July 21, 1906, Elwyn Archives. Superintendents used this fear of “lower-grades” as a disciplinary tool even up to the age of de-institutionalization. This fear also motivated the separation of institutions by impairment. For example, the departments for the deaf and the blind were separated from the Montana School for the Deaf, Blind, and Feebleminded in the 1930s after deaf activists charged that having the institution in their past made potential employers suspect they were not only deaf, but feebleminded as well, limiting their chances for employment.

34 J.E. Wallace Wallin, The Odyssey of a Psychologist: Peioneering Experiences in Special Education, Clinical Psychology, and Mental Hygiene with a Comprehensive Bibliography of the Author’s Publications (Wilmington, Del.: Self-Published, 1955), 186-7


36 Ibid [Farrell “Study of School Inquiry, 73]
Parents were key constituents in the design of special education and its relationship to the institution. For Goddard, parents represented the prime constraining force in solving the feebleminded problem. The two possible solutions to the menace of feeblemindedness that eugenicists such as Goddard advocated were institutional segregation or sterilization, yet neither of these policies could be implemented for the 15,000 New York schoolchildren requiring them.\(^{37}\) Why? “For the reason that their parents will not consent.”\(^ {38}\) Parents did not want to hear that their child was mentally defective and were hesitant to consent to placement in a special class, especially if they suspected that placement would gradually pressure them toward institutionalization. Parental pressure was also the reason that special classes continued to teach literacy despite the feeling among most teachers and psychologists that such lessons were wasted upon the majority of their students. Reading and writing were the primary skills parents wanted their children to acquire in school, and assuring them that a special class placement would not deprive them of education in the 3 R’s was crucial to gaining permission.\(^ {39}\) Indeed, when vocational and manual education expanded from the special class into mainstream curricula, parents objected there, too, because it trained their children into the industrial jobs they would have been working anyway, precluding the upward mobility they expected schooling to provide for their children.\(^ {40}\)

\(^{37}\) Segregation and sterilization were designed as policies to work in tandem. Institutional life could teach a feebleminded person basic self-care and a trade by which to make a living. They could then be sterilized and paroled, making way for more inmates without risking them reproducing.


Yet again, Goddard and Farrell disagreed on the appropriate solution to overcoming parental resistance. Their disagreement was rooted in their contrasting emphasis on the classificatory and social, on the one hand, versus the practical and individual on the other. Despite the growing authority of the State in everyday people’s homes, neither of them proposed compelling parents to institutionalize their children, but advocated different methods of persuasion. Goddard viewed special schools as a necessary evil for supervising feebleminded children until scientific study won the day (and money) for institutional segregation. All psychologists needed was “a body of knowledge behind us.” Sufficient heredity studies and Binet test results would prove the high numbers of feeblemindedness, its hereditary cause, and its social cost. This quantitative knowledge would fuel a “campaign of education” through which they would secure “efficient and far-reaching laws for the sterilization of the unfit.” Additionally, he hoped that once lawmakers were persuaded to invest substantially in institutionalization, that money could go toward improving the reputations of the state’s institutions, or even, he boldly proposed, compensate parents for the labor their children performed as inmates. Together, the threat of social decline and the personal promise that institutionalization wouldn’t prevent parents from benefiting from their child’s labor power would convince parents that institutional segregation was “the wisest thing that can be done for their children, unless they are willing to have them sterilized.”

Farrell proposed a more relationship-oriented approach. Changing parents’ minds required, not data or financial compensation, but a trusting teacher-parent relationship. Building trust also made parents more willing to admit their fears about a child’s impairment and to report

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41 Report on Committee on School Inquiry, 374. He also noted that in the meantime, institutions needed to work on advertising themselves and building their reputations as desirable places to be. He lamented that Randall’s Island, the only institution available to New York City’s feebleminded children, had such a poor reputation that parents would go to great lengths to keep their children away from it.
their beliefs about causation. Showing parents and the broader community that they did not take the diagnosis of incurability lightly, that they had thrown all their hope and energy into improving a child and making them fit to live in the world, would also help make the case for institutionalization easier and more airtight. As the editors of *Ungraded* argued, the special teacher’s job was to attempt to make every student “able to live in the community.” If it became clear that was impossible, “she must be able to demonstrate why they should go to institutions. Her method must be so definite and profound,” they concluded, “that after a suitable time it leaves no doubt as to the potentialities of any child.”\(^{42}\) Whatever the perceived scientific authority and objectivity of intelligence tests, teachers’ firsthand experience with parents convinced them that an intelligence quotient would never persuade them like evidence of time and effort that had yielded minimal improvement.

This point is key: Farrell, special teachers, and the psychologists and physicians who aligned with their cautious approach to labeling and prognosis were *not* opposed to eugenic institutionalization. Indeed, Farrell argued that one of special teachers’ goals should be to “work yourselves out of the job” by institutionalizing every feebleminded child, “preparing the way for the future perfect man and perfect woman.”\(^{43}\) But in the public debate over special classes and institutionalization, the two appeared as warring rather than complementary approaches to feeblemindedness. If special classes were “as expensive as they are ineffective” in solving the overarching problem of feeblemindedness, as one letter to the editor in the *New York Times* asserted, any resources devoted to them would be better spent expanding institutions to shorten waiting lists.\(^{44}\) On the other hand, the prominent New York lawyer and reformer Charles C.

\(^{42}\) “Editorial,” *Ungraded* 2, No. 4 (Jan 1917): 102.

\(^{43}\) Witmer et al, *The Special Class for Backward Children*, 188.

Burlingham argued that total institutionalization was a scientific pipe dream that failed to appreciate the power of parental resistance. “It is not a theory but a condition that confronts us,” he wrote, and if a “theoretic discussion of what shall be done ultimately with incurable defectives” took resources away from Farrell’s practical work, public education and the children it served would suffer.\(^45\) Given parental authority and long institutional waiting lists even for those deemed severely impaired, Farrell and her supporters regarded their hopefulness about returning some students to mainstream classrooms or graduating them into self-supporting, moral lives as far less naive than Goddard’s goal of institutionalizing every child who performed poorly on an intelligence test.

In this feud between Goddard and Farrell, the psychologist experienced a rare defeat. The School Board adopted medical rather than psychological standards for placement in a special class, maintained special classes as part of mainstream school buildings, and gave Farrell the resources to establish her own Psycho-Educational clinic modeled after Witmer’s approaches rather than Goddard’s. Farrell’s victory empowered her to conduct research to support her optimism about the ability of her students to live in the world. In a study of 350 ungraded students who had finished or left school, all of whom had been “certified as mentally defective by duly qualified psychologists and physicians,” Farrell reported that more than half of them were employed for wages. Others were listed as “cared for at home,” though Farrell clarified that many of these graduates still contributed to their household economies. Only 0.7 per cent were in penal institutions, she reported, while 5 per cent were in other institutions.\(^46\) Studies such as hers helped demonstrate that fear-mongering over the moral and economic incapacities of backward

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and feebleminded students had been overblown. They also built support from institution superintendents such as Charles Bernstein of the New York State Custodial Asylum at Rome, who, when the US entered World War I, used the labor shortage to establish new systems of work-based probation and parole for his feebleminded inmates.

The psychologist Lightner Witmer shared Farrell’s hopefulness that many of the children who appeared subnormal could be turned into moral actors and productive citizens. This hope was fundamentally rooted in separating a child’s diagnosis from their prognosis. Every student who ended up in a special class had been identified as subnormal, either in their academic performance or in their moral behavior. Yet that subnormality, Witmer insisted, was a present status, not a permanent label indicating future potential. Just as Farrell argued that a teacher could not declare a case hopeless until she had expended every possible effort at improving a child’s condition, the clinician was obligated to make a “persistent effort” at cure before making a “prophecy of the future condition of the child.”47 Like all other psycho-medical professionals in the twentieth century, Witmer agreed that some children were self-evident “institution cases” who could not be made normal. But, informed by his observations of area training schools for the feebleminded—while apparently overlooking the growing pessimism of their superintendents—Witmer argued that if institutional living could “develop a low grade imbecile into a middle grade imbecile” in practices of self-care and cost-saving labor, “why may not the appropriate training be found to elevate a feebleminded child…into a child of normal intelligence?”

He argued against psychology’s growing tendency to treat a child’s measured mental status or intelligence as an indicator of their future ability to earn a living or obey the law.

47 Witmer, “Treatment and Cure of a Case of Mental and Moral Deficiency,” *TPC* 2, No. 6 (Nov. 1908): 153-155.
Intelligence test proponents argued that properly-administered tests could accurately identify those who were unfit for public life. In contrast, Witmer argued that examinations “extending over an hour, or a day, or even a month, may not be sufficient to make a satisfactory diagnosis.” He considered “most reprehensible the celerity with which some physicians, not a few judges and probation officers, and most layman (sic), will reach a conclusion as to a child’s moral normality or degeneracy after a brief inspection and a hasty review of mostly hearsay reports.”

A test revealed status, but not causation, and therefore gave no indication of how or whether a person could be cured. Only extensive observation and an attempt to remedy every potential physical and environmental contributor to a student’s backwardness in school could prove a child truly and incurably feebleminded. This was the crucial role of the special class in connection to the psychological clinic: not a static holding tank but a “laboratory” and “clearinghouse” where treatments could be tried and evaluated, where diagnoses could safely give way to prognoses. Goddard had slighted special class teachers as unscientific and ignorantly naive; Witmer, however, praised them as crucial knowledge producers in the study of subnormality. “The day is approaching,” he wrote, when “the teacher will be the repository of the best information available” concerning the bodies, minds, and morals of children.

Witmer drew the line of curability with caution and hesitation, as indicated by his founding a “Hospital School,” in which his patients lived for up to a year, receiving private tutoring and attending a special class in public school before receiving a complete diagnosis. His commitment was embodied in the neologism “orthogenics,” the definition of which opened every issue of his journal, *The Psychological Clinic*. Orthogenics was explicitly oriented toward cure and rehabilitation, a practice of identifying a child’s potential and implementing treatments.

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that aimed to fulfill, or even expand, that potential. This approach did not reject the basic precepts of eugenics, nor did it deny the possibility that defects could be transmitted hereditarily. But it did argue that psychologists who emphasized eugenic science often used hereditarianism as a lazy excuse to focus on data gathering rather than on the practical, essential work of helping children. “In place of the hopeless fatalism of those who constantly emphasize our impotence in the presence of the hereditary factor, we prefer the hopeful optimism of those who point out the destructive activity of the environment,” Witmer wrote. “To ascribe a condition to the environment, is a challenge to do something for its amelioration or cure; to ascribe it to heredity too often means that we fold our hands and do nothing.”

Rather than attempting to draw a sharp line between the normal and pathological to create clear guidelines for segregating mentally defective children, Witmer asserted that “in fact all children, are mentally defective.” The only thing that determined whether a mentally defective child should or should not be free to live in world, he argued, was whether they were “so defective mentally as to be socially unfit.” Although he dismissed the notion of born criminality, he did agree that there were children whose combined heredity and environment rendered them “socially unfit,” and they, for their “own good and for the good of society should be segregated for life.” This social definition separated mentality from behavior, undoing the work that Goddard’s category of the moron had done to wed the two. It also, therefore, cast intelligence tests as entirely unsuited to the task of determining which of the

50 Witmer, “Criminals in the Making,” TPC 4, No. 8 (Jan 1911): 232. It should be noted that while Goddard’s most fame-making research was devoted to heredity and emphasized segregating the feebleminded, his laboratory also performed studies focused on creating new therapies and treatment methods for the inmates at Vineland. Goddard served (and continues to serve) as a helpful foil for Witmer and his likeminded colleagues, but he was not such a strict or fatalistic hereditarian as it may seem. Zenderland.
52 Witmer, “Children with Mental Defects Distinguished from Mentally Defective Children” TPC 7, No. 7 (Dec. 1913) pg 173-181.
nation’s children required temporary or permanent segregation. As the editors of *Ungraded* had declared, “Successful living is the only test.”

Witmer was not alone in this view. Clinical psychologist John Edward Wallace Wallin was a key figure in the spread of psycho-educational clinics across the northeast and Midwest. In the course of his career he established clinics and special education systems in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Delaware and across Ohio. He was a leader in the development and adaptation of Binet intelligence tests in the years after their 1910 translation into English, but became a vocal critic of their use in service of institutional segregation. His critiques, like Witmer’s, centered on the need to separate mental and social competence. He went further, asserting that using low intelligence scores to justify institutionalization threatened not only the accuracy and reputation of psychology but the constitutional rights of American citizens. “Every individual,” he insisted, “must be presumed to be socially competent until it has been proved beyond a reasonable doubt that he is not socially competent.” To do anything otherwise would “depriv[e] individuals of the rights guaranteed them under the constitution.” He pointed, therefore, to the high stakes of diagnosing and permanently segregating children whose capacities were presumed rather than proved. He argued that consistent moral misbehavior, rather than a moral status implied by an intelligence score, justified institutional segregation.

Even if the Binet tests eventually became entirely accurate and objective, Wallin objected to the line other psychologists had drawn between the normal and abnormal. Goddard had identified those with mental ages below 12 as dangerous morons, but Wallin argued that the lower limit of normality extended well into the 10-year range and that every child in the broad “borderland” of defect should be granted the “benefit of the doubt” before being segregated,

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whether into a special class or into an institution.\textsuperscript{54} More radically, whereas Witmer expressed similar caution about institutionalizing children because he believed many were curable, Wallin did not attach the right to public education or public life to potential normality. Instead, he argued that people of varying mentalities and impairments could have a place in society and need not automatically fall under the control of the state.\textsuperscript{55}

Hereditarian eugenics often used a child’s feeblemindedness as evidence their parents, too, were feebleminded and therefore the state needed to step in as a competent parent to house and train the child. In contrast, Wallin reserved an important role for parents in determining the wisdom and necessity of their child’s segregation. Even for temporary placements, Wallin argued that “Parents ought to have a right to demand an independent examination…before a child can be placed in a special class.”\textsuperscript{56} More, a child’s diagnosis of feeblemindedness, regardless of severity, could not in itself justify institutionalization. The “parents’ privilege and duty” was to provide “proper support, protection, control, and training,” and as long as they were “willing and capable” of providing it, the state had no reason to interfere, regardless of a child’s measured mentality.\textsuperscript{57} “Willing and capable” was, of course, a subjective measurement that fell more heavily on poor and immigrant families whom clinic social workers and visiting teachers could easily claim were not financially or morally capable of providing “proper” supervision.

American entrance into World War I magnified the problems that Farrell, Witmer, and Wallin had identified with using intelligence tests to justify mass institutionalization. The war

\textsuperscript{54} After the popularization of the IQ, the language of mental age shifted. Goddard and his allies placed moronity at an IQ of between 70 and 80. Wallin argued that even children with IQs as low as 50 could benefit from public school instruction and live moral lives outside of institutional supervision.

\textsuperscript{55} Wallin, \textit{Education of Handicapped Children}, 168-179.

\textsuperscript{56} Wallin, “The Functions of the Psychological Clinic,” \textit{Medical Record} 4, No. 2 (Sept 1913): 523.

\textsuperscript{57} Wallin, \textit{The Education of Handicapped Children}, 31.
was a turning point in the professionalization of psychology. It solidified a national network of applied psychologists that developed and administered written, group intelligence tests to Army recruits to exclude men unfit for service and sort troops into different roles according to their mentality. These tests found a shockingly high number of American men were feebleminded. With white recruits clocking in at an average mental age of 13, if mass institutionalization of morons had seemed unrealistic before, it now became impossible. If being a good citizen required being intelligent, testers found, the nation faced a severe lack of potential citizens.

Researchers who were invested in testing, including American testing’s founders, Goddard and Terman, did not respond to the troubling news by re-examining the intelligence scale itself to label fewer people feebleminded, or by considering alternative ways to define a “fit” citizen. They had invested too much and produced too much research that they believed proved IQ was constant, determined by heredity, and that a low IQ made an individual a drain on society’s resources. Accepting the impossibility of implementing mass institutionalization at a scale required by their findings, they shifted their attention away from the feebleminded. Intelligence testing had not only created the category of the “moron” but also the “gifted.” Whereas the feebleminded represented social degradation, therapeutic disappointments, and increasingly a political dead end, the gifted seemed full of promise. As one prominent psychologist put his plea for prioritizing the gifted, “The special attention which is now being given to the subnormal child in certain of our school systems might much more profitably be devoted to the supernormal. The former is the handicap of the race; the latter, its hope.”

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As historian John Carson has demonstrated, what made intelligence testing and the popularization of the intelligence quotient so revolutionary was that it could assign *every* American citizen a label. Previous diagnostic approaches had been limited to identifying and labeling the subnormal. A focus on categorization propped up older classificatory sciences that had suspected “idiots” and “imbeciles” might represent a different race or species. This suspicion was enshrined in the diagnosis “mongolism,” a term that maintained a clinical presence until Down Syndrome became the preferred label in the 1980s. In contrast, the intelligence quotient placed all individuals on a singular scale. In this way, the concept of measurable intelligence “democratically embrac[ed] everyone at the same moment that it also made visible profound differences between them.”

It proposed a singular axis of difference that offered new legitimacy to hierarchy as objective and without prejudice. The feminist psychologist Leta Stetter Hollingworth exemplifies those whose hope in the promise of intelligence as a fair and scientific way to re-organize society drove their careers away from the incurable feebleminded and toward the gifted and a new form of eugenic politics.

Hollingworth began her professional career as a teacher, and indeed was close friends with Elizabeth Farrell, to whom she dedicated her book *The Psychology of Subnormal Children*. After moving to New York City for her husband’s education and career in psychology, Hollingworth pursued a degree in educational psychology at Columbia University. In 1913, while working towards her doctorate, she began work administering intelligence tests as an assistant at the New York Clearing House for Mental Defectives (CHMD). The CHMD,

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60 Carson, *Measure of Merit*, 185
established in 1912, examined thousands of New York children brought to the clinic by the Children’s Court as well as by concerned parents and charitable societies. After WWI, Hollingworth would devote her attention to gifted children and lament the psychological and political “preoccupation with the incompetent,” but she developed confidence in intelligence testing and its potential for revealing the damaging injustice of sexist social structures through her work with the feebleminded.

A reigning psychological theory of the day, the “gender variability thesis,” declared that men made up the high and low ends of human ability. To its adherents, this explained why men made up the majority of prominent leaders as well as institutional inmates. Women, on the other hand, had lower rates of variability and were biologically oriented toward mediocrity.

Hollingworth used testing data from 1000 cases at the CHMD and 1142 from New York’s Department of Public Welfare to challenge this theory and to question sex-based social organization. Her study demonstrated that, while more male children were brought to clinics as suspected defectives, past the age of 16 females were brought in higher numbers. Of those brought, males were more likely to be institutionalized, and institutionalized females were of much lower intelligence than institutionalized males. As Hollingworth summarized: "A girl must be relatively more stupid than a boy in order to be presented for examination in the first place, and she must be still more stupid comparatively, in order that she may be actually segregated, as unfit for social and economic participation." Therefore, all of the studies that used institutional populations to make arguments about demographic tendencies toward feeblemindedness were invalid, because they failed to account for social forces that made some groups more readily

62 Hollingworth, “Differential Action Upon the Sexes of Forces which Tend to Segregate the Feebleminded” Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology 17 (1922): 35-57; an earlier piece that focused on the CHMD case files is Hollingworth, “Frequency of Amentia as Related to Sex,” Medical Record 84 (1913): 753-756.
institutionalized than others. And the fact that “stupid” women could remain unnoticed, supporting themselves and reproducing their kind through prostitution, she argued, demonstrated that prejudiced ideas about women’s capacity were responsible for the continued rise of the feebleminded population.

Echoing Witmer and Farrell, she argued that feebleminded children differed from the normal only in degree of development. She insisted, though, that education could not develop such a child to normality; it could only train the feebleminded in specific habits including self-care and some forms of unskilled labor. Like others who believed mental defect was hereditary and incurable, Hollingworth thought eugenic policies of segregation and sterilization could drastically reduce the feebleminded population. There were two interrelated barriers to implementing these preventive policies: democratic notions of equality and the parents who bought into them. “A revision of the prevalent concept of democracy” would be necessary to make any progress on the problem of feeblemindedness, she wrote. Broader American society would have to recognize that, though the “forefathers believed that men were free and equal,” psychology had demonstrated “that all men are, as a matter of biological fact, created unequal.” Persisting ideas about human equality were largely responsible for parents’ resistance to eugenic policies, Hollingworth argued. They placed their hope in medicine, in schools, or in the passage of time, trusting that their children would become normal and equal to their peers.

To some extent, Hollingworth understood that hopefulness. Indeed, in 1935, as she lectured on the implications of psychology’s discovery of human inequality, she presented the field as an inherently hopeful profession that had been dragged unwillingly into pessimism by indisputable science. The psychologist was “more than any other desirous of convincing himself that all human beings can be made intelligent, beautiful, strong, honest, brave, wealthy and
happy, preferably by the methods of education,” she remarked. But when he “finally stagers in with his findings, and in all honesty is compelled to announce that his hopes are blighted,” he is portrayed as “a malicious enemy of human betterment.”63 This reflection is a telling glimpse at what may have fueled hereditarian psychology’s turn from the feebleminded toward the gifted. Accepting that psychology could not expand a child’s capacity but could implement strategies to help them reach it, Hollingworth sought out those who held the “extraordinary capacity to lead, rule, and advise mankind.”64 Training the feebleminded up to their capacity would prevent them from becoming “savage, filthy, antisocial, helpless,—a great social burden.”65 Helping gifted children fulfill their potential, on the other hand, would mold citizens who would “create national wealth, determine the state of industry, advance science, and make general culture possible.”66 For psychologists with “blighted” hopes, tired of being the bearers of bad news, the gifted represented a redeeming cause for optimism.

Although Goddard and Terman also took up study of the gifted, Hollingworth is widely regarded as the founder of gifted education. In 1922, she founded experimental gifted classes in New York City in which she explored the benefits and drawbacks of progressing through the typical curriculum quickly compared to an “enriched” curriculum that supplemented standard lessons with more independent project-based learning. She and Terman produced longitudinal studies to disprove the widely held stereotypes that gifted children were prone to physical frailty and faded in ability or mental stability as they aged. By demonstrating the strength and unfading vitality of the gifted, they presented investment in superior children as a policy of progress, whereas funding for the feebleminded went toward maintaining a demoralizing status quo.

64 Hollingworth, Gifted Children,” 345.
65 Subnormal Children, 195.
66 Gifted Children 297
More, Hollingworth used her work with the gifted to advocate a feminist eugenics.67 Herself without children, Hollingworth argued that the pain, risks, and sacrifice of career that motherhood entailed meant that all women who were intelligent enough to limit their family size would do so. “If our state were scientifically Utopian instead of romantically prejudiced against the teachings of biology and psychology,” she suggested, it could implement policies that unabashedly favored the intelligent. Eugenically-informed governance could pursue revolutionary solutions that were better for women and better for the race: increased research in obstetrics to reduce the pain and risk of childbirth, cash bonuses to reward intelligent women for having children, the development of alternatives to breastfeeding so new mothers could remain in the workforce, and the expansion of nursery care.68

To sum up, in 1910, intelligence testing seemed a technology full of promise for identifying and segregating the nation’s subnormal school children into special classes and, eventually, into institutions. In the “moron,” testing’s popularizers created a category of mental defect that presumed innate criminality and could only be detected by the technology of testing itself. Yet because these tests established such a high bar for normality, they quickly created a problem bigger than they could solve. The persistent hopes of special class teachers to restore subnormal children to mainstream education, and parental resistance to special class or institutional placement, helped fuel an alternative psychological approach that questioned the assumptions of testing and the “problem” it had revealed. This approach privileged extended periods of evaluation and treatment before diagnosis, separated mental capacity from criminality,

and was cautious in its promotion of institutionalization. It placed hope in the idea that many children who seemed feebleminded might be restored by medical treatment, individualized curricula, and appropriate home surroundings.

Psychologists who could not bring themselves to question intelligence testing’s assumptions identified hope, not in improving subnormal children’s intelligence but in the superior children whom testing had also revealed. For Hollingworth, this “scientifically Utopian” meritocracy that distributed resources and power according to intelligence promised women a better future. As historian Nathan Sleeter demonstrates, Terman likewise believed that IQ tests were “instruments of fairness” because they sometimes identified impoverished children as intelligent. They promised a hierarchy that did not profoundly disrupt social organization, for most gifted children were white and had fathers in professions, and black children and immigrants reliably tested poorly. This alignment was baked into the very writing and administration of the tests, but because an occasional exceptional child from a poor background or racialized minority tested well, testing advocates held to the idea that tests were an objective tool for identifying a child’s inherent potential. Having faced political and parental resistance to the segregation of the feebleminded, Hollingworth and her colleagues instead embraced the segregation of the superior. The creation of gifted classes completed the construction of the continuum of care, which efficiently delivered instruction in accordance with children’s perceived capacities. Fitting the school to the child meant that institutions, special classes, and public schools that served racialized minorities used vocational training to prepare future laborers, while gifted children were groomed as future leaders and saviors of the race.

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