# The complex legacy of the Walter E. Fernald State School and disability care in America



The Walter E. Fernald State School in Waltham, Massachusetts, which operated from 1848 until its closure in 2014, stands as a significant chapter in the history of institutional care for the disabled in the United States. Its legacy is complex, marked by both advances in special education and deeply troubling practices, including neglect, abuse, and controversial scientific experiments.

In the mid-20th century, the school was emblematic of the nation’s widespread institutionalisation of the disabled, with underfunded facilities and mistreatment commonplace. A notable scandal emerged in the early 1990s when it was revealed that, between 1946 and 1953, 74 boys aged 10 to 17 were fed radioactive isotopes in their oatmeal as part of a study conducted by researchers from Harvard and MIT, with involvement from Quaker Oats.

Following a class action lawsuit, Ricci v. Okin, in 1972, Massachusetts courts assumed oversight of Fernald and other similar state institutions, which resulted in increased staffing and funding. These improvements reportedly enhanced the quality of care and life for residents, leading to some families protesting the institution’s closure decades later.

A significant figure in Fernald’s history is its third superintendent, Walter E. Fernald (1859–1924), a psychiatrist whose career embodied the contradictions of disability care in his era. His biographer, Alex Green, a lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School, highlights Fernald’s pioneering role in developing special education in public schools—a practice previously non-existent in the United States—as well as his advocacy for separating disabled individuals from society through institutionalisation.

According to Green, Fernald inherited a dilapidated and overcrowded Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded in 1887. He was instrumental in relocating and rebuilding the institution in Waltham, aiming to create what he envisioned as a utopian environment for disabled children. Fernald’s educational initiatives led to the establishment of some of America’s first special education programmes, including developing a curriculum for disabled students in Providence, Rhode Island, which became a model adopted across the country.

However, Fernald’s legacy is also intertwined with the eugenics movement, which sought to improve human populations by controlled breeding. In the early 1900s, Fernald became focused on the concept of the “defective delinquent,” individuals whose disabilities manifested as criminal behaviour, and he advocated for their lifelong segregation in institutions. This approach contributed to the expansion of large institutions and influenced practices nationally.

Later in his life, Fernald’s views evolved. As Green notes, Fernald began to question the research underpinning eugenics and conducted follow-up studies that found many former residents living peaceful, productive lives outside of institutions. He emerged as a vocal opponent of forced sterilisation of disabled people, successfully influencing New York to repeal its sterilisation law in 1916. In 1919, Fernald published a pamphlet calling for the deinstitutionalisation of disabled individuals and promoting their integration into communities.

Despite Fernald’s late-life shift, his death in 1924 left a void in leadership that saw eugenics and institutionalisation advance in the following decades. Landmark legal decisions such as Buck v. Bell in 1927 upheld forced sterilisation practices, and institutional populations surged after World War II, reaching over 200,000 by the late 1960s.

In recent years, discussions around disability rights and institutional care have regained prominence, especially with challenges to funding for special education programmes and a resurgence of eugenicist rhetoric in political discourse. Alex Green warns of these parallels, stating to The Boston Globe, “If we get rid of many of the social supports that exist for disabled people to live in our communities and go to school and be part of society, we’re going to start seeing that world again where people are chained up in yards, hidden in attics, and abused terribly.”

Reflecting on his research and interviews with people affected by institutionalisation, Green asserts, “Any form of institutionalisation is wrong. It is impossible to do it without depriving people of basic rights and harming them more than you are helping them. That’s something that Fernald himself realised at the end of his life.”

The closing of the Fernald School and subsequent debates over its legacy encapsulate the difficult evolution of disability care in America—from early efforts at education and care to the harsh realities of segregation and abuse, and the ongoing struggle for humane and inclusive treatment of disabled individuals.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.city.waltham.ma.us/fernald-reuse-committee/files/history-of-the-fernald-center> - This document provides historical context about the founding of the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded, later known as the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center, and its establishment in Waltham. It highlights the school's foundational role in the care of people with developmental disabilities.
2. <https://fernaldstateschool.com> - This website is part of a recordation project and offers insights into the history and operations of Fernald State School and Hospital, supporting the narrative about the institution's growth and its role in the care of disabled individuals.
3. <https://www.city.waltham.ma.us/historical-commission/pages/walter-e-fernald-developmental-center> - This webpage from the City of Waltham provides historical information about the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center, including its relocation to Waltham and the role of Superintendent Walter E. Fernald, which corroborates his influence in institutional development.
4. <https://below-the-surface.github.io/main.html> - This site discusses the broader context of institutionalization in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, highlighting how Fernald's shift to Waltham reflected national trends in institutional care and societal attitudes towards disability.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_E._Fernald_Developmental_Center> - This Wikipedia entry provides a comprehensive overview of the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center's history, including its operations, controversies, and eventual closure, serving as a broad source for understanding its legacy.
6. <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2020/04/14/disability-rights-nursing-homes-coronavirus-crisis/> - Although not directly about Fernald, this article touches upon contemporary issues in disability care and institutionalization, reflecting ongoing discussions about the treatment of disabled individuals in society.
7. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/04/29/opinion/walter-fernald-legacy-alex-green-book/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data