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ABSTRACT

Leonard Covello was an Italian immigrant who taught in East Harlem (New York City) from 1911 to 1956. This article, composed of excerpts from other works about or by him, illustrates his dedication to reciprocal relationships between school and community that are relevant today for both urban and rural communities. When Covello left school in his junior year to work, he learned that work was an important means of crossing physical and cultural boundaries and that work should be more connected to schools as a vehicle for enabling discussion about racial discrimination. Covello lived in East Harlem because it enabled him to see his students and their families in the streets and in their homes. He recognized that issues such as housing and medical care were important to the community because he lived there, and it was natural for him to involve the school in such issues. The departments in the school developed their curricula around relevant community issues so that local matters formed a base for much of the learning. Covello involved his students in service learning such as citizenship education for immigrants. Covello felt that schools were ideally situated to be centers for democratic education; they are the only social agency that has direct contact with practically every family in the community and this contact is mandatory by law. Schools should therefore cultivate a spirit of friendliness and intelligent cooperation in the building of wholesome social and civic relationships. (TD)

REFLECTIONS ON LEONARD COVELLO: Teacher with a Heart

Vito Perrone

The excerpts which follow come from a larger text on my reflections on Leonard Covello who come to East Harlem (New York City) from Avigliano, Italy in 1896, graduated from Columbia University in 1911 and for the next 45 years was a teacher and principal in East Harlem. What stands out in his remarkable career as an educator is his commitment to his East Harlem community and his understanding that the school and the community needed a reciprocal relationship.

Covello's story is very urban, but his work has close connections to what the Rural Challenge is offering for rural schools and communities. It seemed that Covello's work, and my reflections, might be useful to schools and communities associated with the Rural Challenge, offering yet more possibilities.

The account below is not a connected narrative. I have taken segments from many different places in the text. The ellipses (...) denote a break in the narrative. Also, page references without other author information indicate content which comes directly from Covello's autobiography, The Heart is the Teacher.

What Covello learned when he left school to become a full time worker [he left school in his junior year] was that the compensation was not great enough to make a substantial difference in family circumstances. Moreover, he was not particularly happy and he stayed mostly at home when not working, burying himself in books. Mary Accurso, at this time in college, convinced Covello that he should go back to school, that conditions might not be good for his family but the family would survive as it had been surviving. His parents offered no rejoinder to his decision to return to school as they had given no protest about his decision to leave school. Southern Italian immigrant children often had to make their own decisions about such things. In saying this, I am immediately brought back to my teaching experience in a school setting, hearing many of my teacher colleagues speak about how irresponsible so many of their students were. Yet many of these students, like Covello, were regularly making major decisions about their lives, often without much adult support. We need to make connections to that particular

level of genuine responsibility.

Were there benefits from his year of fulltime work? Covello says that being out in the work world meant meeting many different people from many different nationalities. He began to think differently about the Irish, the Poles, the Jews. "I found out," he says, "that New York did not consist of merely Americans and Italians, but rather of people in varying stages of the thing called Americanization....I began to find myself reacting differently toward the bustling humanity around me" (p.56).

Work was for Covello an important means of crossing boundaries, of moving beyond the isolation of Avigliano and his East Harlem neighborhood. How, today, do we help students get beyond the boundaries that exist for them? We speak of the immigrant ghettos of Covello's growing up period as if such insular islands no longer exist. Housing patterns, dictated to a large degree by social attitudes and economic status, still leave most people in ghettoized situations. Those who live in the middle and upper class suburban communities of America see few people different from themselves. They don't see much of the growing population of color in the United States. While they have larger horizons than their poorer neighbors in America's central cities, they still travel fairly circumscribed routes. And African-Americans, Southeast Asians and Hispanics live out much of their lives in relatively familiar settings. Students in many of our urban communities seldom go outside of narrowly drawn geographical boundaries in which most people look like them and dress like them.

We need to find ways of supporting students to move beyond their physical and cultural boundaries, to meet, work with, get to know others better. Work often makes this more possible. Can work become more connected to the schools? more integral to the curriculum? We now have increasing numbers of schools, mostly in urban settings, developing school-to-work/to career/to post-secondary education programs. They should be broader, involve more students, be related to richer and more diverse work/career settings. Some of what Covello found outside of school regarding learning about others could be more connected to school.

A particular concern of many contemporary secondary schools remains students who work while in school. One difference is that work doesn't necessarily lead students out of school permanently—as was often the case in earlier times. As it is, close to 70 percent of secondary school students are employed, working on average from 15-18 hours per week, principally in the burgeoning fast-food and service industries. Rather than viewing this work as positive, contributing to student responsibility and a sense of usefulness, however, those in schools speak of it primarily as lessening student commitments to the school's academic and extracurricular programs and fostering what they believe to be an unhealthy materialism. Once again it is as if the work of the school and the larger world must be in conflict, that there aren't connecting points of consequence that actually affect the students and their learning.

While I acknowledge that students who work over twenty hours a week (and this encompasses almost half of student workers) tend to suffer academically within the current structure of schools (time bound, restrictive in terms of the number of courses a student must take each semester, and curricularly insular), the work of students needs to be thought about more constructively (as does the structure of schools). Students, for example, speak of what they do in their work as "being useful," "creating a sense of independence" and "responsibility." They also tend to enjoy their work. And employers

see them as reliable and competent. Are such perspectives to be negated? Is there no way to use such awareness?

I often ask teachers why they don't have students maintain journals of their work experience; why they don't make these work experiences the focus of study in courses in health, nutrition, science, economics, mathematics, government, history and literature; why they don't engage more directly the materialist culture that is so potent in American society and contributes heavily to student employment. Can't the world these students have entered into so fully be connected to the ongoing and important work of the schools?

A number of schools have actually sought means of constructing more productive school-work connections. In some cases, this has been done through worksite internships or apprenticeships. Students in the Children's Hospital collaborative, one of the worksite programs of the Fenway School in Boston, carry out as part of their work a research project under the supervision of a hospital staff person that is the primary science-related project required by the school. Students in the Elementary School Teaching Program associated with the Cambridge Rindge & Latin School write children's books as part of their English requirement. At Central Park East, students must complete an internship/work requirement for graduation that includes a reflective paper placing the work in historical/cultural context. And in several of the schools associated with the Annenberg Rural Challenge, teachers and students are actively engaged together in entrepreneurial enterprises in their communities. Creating businesses, run by students, has become a well integrated element of the academic program. The rationale in these settings for encouraging entrepreneurial activities is that students need to learn how to create work so they can live where they wish to live. These are certainly beginning efforts - - road maps to an even larger set of possibilities.

More confident, more comfortable with students from other backgrounds after a year out of school, Covello became, when he returned, more involved in school activities and more engaged with the academic course work. He also got more engaged by matters of social injustice, something he thought about a good deal while outside of school. He notes, though, being cautioned not to speak or write about such things. He wondered why "the oppression of people" wasn't a topic for the school—whether the peasants in Russia being cruelly treated by the Czarist government or "immigrants and negroes" in the United States who faced injustice everyday. How much has changed? Is the school a major venue for examining intensively critical social issues?

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Why is it so hard in our schools to actually examine the conditions that exist for our students and their families? for those who are described as different? One of the most important contemporary stories in Boston's history relates to the court ordered desegregation of the schools. In many schools, teachers are admonished not to discuss it, not to present the Eyes on the Prize account of the violence. Race plays a particularly large role in the life of Boston. Not to make this a matter of examination seems unhealthy. Yet it goes, for the most part, unexamined.

We have a curious educational history in regard to what are considered "controversial issues." In some respects, almost everything that exists in the world has aspects that could be seen as controversial. Do we want our students to ask why hunger exists in the world? Or why there are homeless people in the streets? Or why African-

Americans face such harsh discrimination? Or why there is such disparity of wealth in the United States? Or why so much money is spent on space exploration? Or why the atom bomb was actually used on a civilian population? Or how our cities can be more livable? Or how universal health care can be assured? Or how we can preserve more effectively the environment? Or what the possibilities and problems are in relation to genetic engineering? Or what the problems are with the various books that people want to censor in some form? Or what the abortion struggle is about? Or why the school restricts students' rights to expression or assembly? Or why our schools are so poorly equipped and maintained? Shouldn't school classrooms be venues for conversation about the world, places where students learn to engage critical issues thoughtfully, weighing carefully the evidence, coming to understand alternative perspectives? In relation to the foregoing, it is a delight to be in The Urban Academy, a small public school in New York City, where everything studied is presented through alternative views, a range of questions and interpretations. One interesting recent course was titled, "Don't Read That Book: Censorship in America." Another was "Who Freed the Slaves?" As one student shared with me, "I have learned to separate a person's ideas and beliefs from the person. I can now disagree with a person's ideas without feeling I must also physically attack or ridicule the person." That is an important lesson. Is there any better place than a school for that kind of learning?

In settings in which the world is permitted to enter the classroom, where students are encouraged to ask about the connections between what they study and what they read in the newspapers, see on television and observe in the streets, what is often called controversial is just ongoing inquiry. This is a healthier place for teachers and students to stand.

Covello thought it was important to live in the community, close to his students. This, he noted, made it possible for him to see his students and their families in the streets. He conveys in his autobiography and various speeches how often he had important conversations with students and their parents outside of school, in their more natural environment. He clearly valued these exchanges. It meant, as he saw it , that he could visit the homes of his students more easily. And he was, as students recalled, a frequent visitor in their homes. It meant, as well, that community issues affecting his students were also his issues, affecting him personally as well as professionally.

Covello thought it was natural, for example, to make housing a major issue for the Benjamin Franklin Community School to assume leadership around, because it mattered to his students and their families—as well as to him. In addition, he personally got involved, as a teacher, in organizing neighborhood libraries in the East Harlem community—because he lived there and could speak easily to his students, parents and community members about the importance of such libraries and their collective need to help staff them. Moreover, that East Harlem should have better medical facilities was clear to Covello, another issue for the school to consider critical because he lived in East Harlem and knew a good deal about community needs. Making medical care a school-wide issue also seemed natural to Covello as he came to believe that the schools' curriculum needed to be connected to community concerns. He understood well the meaning of "a pedagogy of place."

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In our schools today, teachers are looking out increasingly at students of many racial,

linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In many respects, our schools have never been as universal nor our population so varied. While Covello was not faced by as much diversity as currently exists, the issues were, nonetheless, not so different. Race, language and cultural matters, alongside severe problems of housing, healthcare and discrimination certainly dominated life in and around Covello's schools.

The discourse of multiculturalism is large at the present time but it gets played out mostly in the form of supplementary literature or by regularly scheduled days, weeks, or months devoted to a particular racial, ethnic or cultural group. This is clearly an advancement, but it remains only a marginal response. What I have found most prevalent in the schools around race and cultural matters, however, is silence. Can we really believe that the barriers that now exist, that keep us from achieving the democratic ideals, the social justice, the economic progress that we hold out in our public discourse, will ever fall away without confronting more directly matters of race in the schools and in the society? How many more generations of silence can we endure? As it is, inquiries into matters of race in schools, colleges and universities are awkward, guilt-ridden, sometimes hostile, but mostly absent. Where beyond schools and college classrooms are young people to learn to discuss matters of race with intelligence and sensitivity? How else but through active consideration of race will teachers and administrators in schools assume a higher level of awareness and take more seriously the effects of inequitable educational opportunity? I continue in this regard to be surprised by the denial of differential education for students of color—overplacement in special education and in lower level courses, higher levels of suspension, lower graduation rates, higher dropout rates. When will such problems matter enough to actually do something about them? They don't exist by chance.

Covello was unusually sensitive to racial and cultural differences. He had heard enough "wop" and "dagos" to know that "kike", "nigger" and "spick" were closely related, that any effort to diminish another person was in itself diminishing. Race and culture were subjects to talk about, not hide.

One of the committees formed at the Benjamin Franklin Community School was The Racial Committee. It had as a central purpose changing attitudes by constructing within the school more inter-cultural curriculum, assuring integrated clubs, committees and social events and encouraging in the community larger forums for discussion about issues relating to ethnicity and race.

By 1938, the school's curriculum, in every subject field, had intercultural content. It was a matter of genuine conversation in department meetings and in classrooms. Teachers assumed responsibility for learning more about their students and their cultural backgrounds. We are not doing better today. In fact, we may be doing worse.

Major conferences on racial and ethnic group relations were organized at the school. Two which received considerable public notice were the "Greater New York Conference on Racial and Cultural Relations in the United States" (in 1942) and "The Conference on Racial Conflict" (in 1943). Conference sponsors, beyond the Benjamin Franklin Racial Committee were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The American Jewish Council, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the National Urban League and the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born (Peebles, p.272).

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, currently New York's senior Senator, provided as a high

school student a set of resolutions to the 1942 Conference on Race and Cultural Relations on behalf of the Benjamin Franklin Racial Committee. They were as follows: an end to racial segregation in the armed forces; the merging of Negro and White blood banks by the Red Cross; an increase in teachers representing various racial and cultural groups; and the appointment of a Director of Inter-cultural Education to support teachers in New York schools to promote inter group understanding (Peebles, p.273). From a distance, it is hard not to be impressed by the fact that such issues were common enough to be discussed in the school setting and formulated as resolutions for debate. How many schools today are ready to examine racial attitudes in their schools and communities? or consider ways of assuring that teachers are more representative of local populations? or call for an end to discriminatory employment practices against certain racial or ethnic groups? or seek evidence about whether there is differential treatment of people in the criminal justice system or the health care systems? Most of us could add to this set of questions.

Covello noted of these large conferences, and other similar forums held in the East Harlem community:

> *In recent years, there has been a tendency to isolate youth in 'youth movements' and 'youth groups.' For some purposes, this is an excellent idea; but, in working out major problems in community life, both young people and old people should have a share. Both will learn much from the school, which assumes the leadership; and each will learn from the other. Covello Papers-Peebles, p.274*

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What does it mean for teachers to work together? Can some unified work be pursued? Covello made clear that "we had to prepare our students for the very serious business of living and sharing in the responsibilities of society" (p.205). As he saw it, everyone in the school had to pull together around such a purpose.

I cite the following account from the early work at the Benjamin Franklin Community School as an example of joint work.

> *In the English Department, Austin Works channeled literature in the direction of books that gave the pupil a realistic picture of the world he lived in, as well as what was expected of him in return. Along with Shakespeare and Milton and Scott, the student was given writers such as Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, who dealt with contemporary social problems.*
>
> *Social-study classes stressed the theme 'Know Your Community!'*
>
> *The Art Department worked out a huge map of East Harlem, carefully outlining individual blocks. From this original which hung in my office, duplicates of a smaller size were printed and distributed to the various departments of the school and civic organizations of the neighborhood, to be used for their own purposes.*
>
> *Slowly, on the master map, we began to accumulate information which, in turn, was fed out to the smaller maps. Before anything else, we wanted to know where our students lived. In varying colors to indicate nationality, we spotted them on the map. and were astonished to find distributions and concentrations of population never before realized. As part of their social-studies experience, the boys took to the streets after hours with pencil and paper to gather statistical information*

about their neighborhood which the Art Department, in terms of symbols, transferred to the master map.

The map showed that in East Harlem there were forty-one churches and missions, twenty-two political clubs, nine labor organizations, five hundred and six candy stores, two hundred sixty-two barber shops. There were twenty-eight liquor stores, one hundred fifty-six bars, twenty-six junk shops, six hundred eighty-five grocers, three hundred seventy-eight restaurants, two hundred thirty-two tailors, and sixty-three radio repair shops, as well as two hundred ninety-seven doctors, seventy-four dentists, one hundred and two furniture stores, and fourteen loan offices. Hungrily our map devoured these statistics. With all the different markers in it, it began to look like a pin cushion.

While many of the things we discovered we already knew, it was both significant and depressing, both to students and to us teachers, to realize that a community which could support forty-one religious institutions and twenty-two political clubs could boast only a few open playgrounds for its children, three public halls, no neighborhood newspaper at all...

At this time we had already started our campaign for a housing project in East Harlem and a new building for our school. But the leg work of our students showed that it was one thing to talk about modern housing projects such as those being launched in other parts of the city but another to overcome the many problems involved. The idea of compact units with thousands of families living in comfortable apartments, each with independent toilet and bath, was wonderful to contemplate and fight for. But what would happen to the dozens of little merchants in each block who would be dispossessed? Was no one to consider the five hundred and six candy store owners, the six hundred eighty-five grocers, the two hundred sixty-two barbers, most of whom had never known a home outside of East Harlem? Where would they go when the wrecking crews came in to wipe out six square blocks to make way for the new housing project?...We had to learn before we achieved the millennium
(pp.205-206).

It is impressive, to me, that students learned so much about their local setting—that it served as a base for so much of their subject matter learning. In the homogenization of our schools, what is most local is not critically examined—only serving to confirm the disconnectedness of the schools.

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The connection of the school to the world came through in other ways at the Benjamin Franklin Community School. Covello noted:

Take the world of art, for instance. In too many city schools...the artwork produced by students used to depict a woodland scene, a landscape, or a seascape. Art, like poetry, was treated as something apart from the reality of daily living. We tried to get away from this at Franklin. There, art study tied in closely with our concern with the community. What many of the boys produced, as an expression of themselves, reflected their thoughts and ideas about the daily business of living in East Harlem.

Instead of a waterfall with a mill, a painting would show a mud-colored brick tenement with ugly fire escapes and laundry hanging on the roof; but on the front stoop, men in shirt sleeves caught a moment of sunlight. Instead of the surf and rock-bound coast of Maine, a charcoal sketch showed a dock on the East River and tugboats and kids swimming. It was vital art, and alive. In the midst of squalor it spoke the yearning for a better life. The walls of our building were not decorated with reproductions of old masterpieces. We hung the best work of our students. It made them proud and gave them an incentive to do better... (p.216-217).

Other examples grew from projects that related to community problems.

Each student was required to select a problem and follow it through. The group studying the problems of the slums was expected to make a personal investigation of actual slum conditions. The group studying problems of the "melting pot" had to ascertain through actual observation and personal investigation the difficulties presented in the adjustment of racial differences and animosities.

Each student had to turn in a midterm theme and a final term theme showing his personal reaction to the problem studied. These individual themes were something personal—essays, possibly stories, even verse, showing by the student's reactions to external stimuli what went on deep inside of him.

I have still in my possession one such theme given to me as a gift. It is a story in photographs done by a student named Hans Geissler. I remember him as a shy, blond lad always coming to class with a camera dangling from his shoulder. The photographs, bound into a book, show on the cover a Negro and a white man seated together in front of a fire made out of a few pieces of cardboard, trying to warm themselves, while the wretchedness of the slums spreads all around them...

About the cover illustration itself he reported, 'These two men earn their bare living by selling paper cartons which they pick up from refuse thrown out by grocery stores. It was a cold Sunday morning when this photograph was taken. The dying fire may well illustrate their dying souls, but do not let it be thought that they have given up hope or ambition. What little work they have to do, they do well.....'

The last photograph is a close-up—a portrait of a man's head. The mouth is firm, hard. The eyes sullen. The brow furrowed, as if the brain reaches for a balance between fury and despair. 'The forgotten man—the refuse of the depression,' wrote Hans. 'His problems are our problems, because if we do not help him solve his, ours will never be solved.' (pp.217-218).

Teachers at Benjamin Franklin understood that students made larger commitments to topics they selected themselves, worked at over time, brought to a finished point. This meant a curriculum that was not overly prescriptive, that helped students learn what they needed to know in order to do what they wanted to do. Further, time was provided for students to do good work and to share their learning with others. As it is, students often don't complete much work in school that they truly honor.

In recounting student projects — that came from students' own passions, that meant something important to them — Covello was also making a statement about educational

standards. He understood what many thoughtful teachers have also long understood, that students already possess standards as well as work toward new standards. That some students successfully researched land values in East Harlem and presented their work authoritatively meant such work was possible and it was possible for others. Doing primary research on community issues became more and more commonplace. When the first student presented a documentary history with photographs as a base, such documentary histories became more common. The first literary review brought other literary reviews. The first set of biographies of East Harlem residents stimulated other biographies. High quality work made visible, shared with other students and members of the community, was a catalyst at Benjamin Franklin for ever higher quality work.

This dynamic character of standards (Carini, 1994) needs to be made more central to current thought in schools. As it is, standards are being established externally and mostly in static language. They are not likely to encourage among students or teachers their best work.

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Under Covello's watch, students always played responsible roles. While he accounts in his autobiography for many such examples, one stands out for me. The occasion was a presentation by Fiorello LaGuardia, then President of the Board of Aldermen of New York, a popular Italian politician, well known in the East Harlem community. Vito Marcantonio, representing "Il Circolo Italiano," was to offer a student speech and then introduce LaGuardia. Covello recounts:

> *It would be difficult for anyone to forget the startled faces of the students gathered at assembly that day when Marc stepped forward on the speaker's platform and said, 'This morning I am going to talk about old-age pensions and social security...'*
>
> *In a few moments, there was complete silence in the auditorium as Marc's impassioned voice pressed the argument for providing for the old age of people who with their labor had helped to build America but who had never been able to earn more than enough to feed their children and pay for the clothes on their backs. He spoke passionately, eloquently—and, I know, sincerely. '...for, if it is true that government is of the people and for the people, then it is the duty of government to provide for those who, through no fault of their own, have been unable to provide for themselves. It is the social responsibility of every citizen to see that these laws for our older people are enacted.'*
>
> *The applause which followed as Marc backed away from the lectern convinced me more than ever that adolescents are far more capable of serious thought and understanding than they are given credit for being...*
>
> *LaGuardia shook Marc's hand, slapped him on the shoulder in a congratulatory gesture. Then, in his own inimitable way, he thrust out his chin and picked up the thread of Marc's speech and used it as the basis for his own talk. "Our neglected citizens...." His audience howled.*
>
> *Assembly that day was a huge success... Most important of all, for LaGuardia and Marcantonio it was the beginning of an association and friendship which was to endure for many years. Almost as soon as he had finished law school, Marc*

went to work in LaGuardia's congressional campaigns in East Harlem. When LaGuardia was elected Mayor of New York in 1933, Marc was elected to replace him in Congress (pp.53-54).

We don't typically help our students assume responsible roles in our schools, gaining the kinds of experiences that enable them to be actively involved in their communities. We certainly don't commonly ask them to consider contemporary dilemmas and, after careful research, offer possible solutions.

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Covello brought large numbers of students—first at DeWitt Clinton and then at Benjamin Franklin—into the community, believing that an education that included active service was essential. Service has rebounded in contemporary schools, but in most settings it is carefully measured, aimed more at the student and his or her growth than at the related local communities and their well being. In the best of situations, service activities would have a more reciprocal quality.

Large numbers of Covello's students were involved in citizenship education work, many at La Casa del Popolo (the people's house) which was devoted to immigrant families. Covello was actively involved in programs there before he got students involved. Recognizing that there were not enough teachers to meet the demand for citizenship education, Covello turned the problem over to the students, suggesting that:

We can't expect much help from the outside. After all, these are our own people. If we don't help them, who will? Are we going to allow them to be robbed of their rights as Americans simply because we are too indifferent to teach them English and train them to pass the citizenship tests? (p.155)

Being challenged by Covello to do real work in the community, large numbers of students volunteered. As Covello notes, the students "turned out to be vigorous teachers" (p.156) who brought large numbers of adults through the entire naturalization process. This was yet another venue for involving students in active citizenship, providing students a larger measure of responsibility, self-efficacy, an important place in an intergenerational world. It seems that our schools today are more rigidly age-segregated than ever before. We have children engaged mostly with children their own ages. That we have what many call "a youth culture problem" is one result.

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In the 60s, many schools, as part of their commitments to the civil rights revolution, got students involved in voter registration drives. Like Covello's activities around citizenship training, this was genuine service. And in many communities, students are involved in building projects related to senior citizens or to Habitat for Humanity. These, too, represent genuine service work. In settings in which community needs are a focus of study, service activities assume this more salutary quality.

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Two other service oriented, academically related projects that Covello made much of in his autobiography and other writings related to the work of the Playlot and Health Committees. The Playlot Committee, responding to community concerns about playspaces for young children, cleaned up several rubble filled lots for conversion into

playgrounds. Working with large numbers of school and community volunteers and a host of city agencies, the members of the Playlot Committee opened their first playground in 1937 — the Franklin Playlot. The opening ceremony generated considerable enthusiasm. Covello writes of this effort:

> *We had achieved what we felt should be one of the basic aims of education — improvement of community life, not merely through discussion but through a demonstration of school-community action. It is true that recreational problems are city problems and the responsibility for their solution rests to a great extent with city agencies. But the citizens must assume the final responsibility and the ability to assume the responsibility must be inculcated in the growing child (p.254).*

One of the projects of the Health Committee related to sanitary conditions in East Harlem, something the newspapers often commented on. Along with educational activities, the Committee also promoted block efforts to clean up neighborhoods, giving prizes to those blocks that had done the most. Importantly, the Committee also organized petition drives to gain higher quality city services, arguing that the city did not address sufficiently the needs of poorer communities. In regard to this sanitation work, Covello acknowledged that it was hard to know how much good all the work did but he believed, nonetheless, that such efforts to make the community better provided an important educational experience equal to anything else that might have been offered.

Feeling confident about students taking part in authentic community tasks where they would have to be responsible persons seemed natural for Covello. Currently, children and young people tend to describe their school learning as having very little to do with their lives beyond school. When students speak of the "remoteness " of school, and they do, they are really talking about the lack of connection between school and the world outside. They are essentially acknowledging what Alfred North Whitehead noted—that most of what is taught in school is not about life "as it is known in the midst of living it."

Students see, for example, homelessness and poverty in the streets around them, they know about immigration as they hear so many languages being spoken, they are aware of racial discord, community violence, drugs, war, famine and environmental degradation. That schools do not explore such issues deeply, for the most part even ignoring them, reinforces for students that the schools are about something other than the realities of the world. This is unfortunate.

Further, the content of schools seldom relates to what people in a particular community are worried about or care deeply about. For example, the schools do not often make the historical and cultural roots or the economic and political structures of their local communities a focus of study. A community's storytellers, craftpersons, builders, day care and health providers are not common visitors. The literature that is read has generally not been selected because it helps them assume a larger sense of responsibility for some aspect of the social good or makes it possible for them to engage a non-school mentor more productively or assist a person in need. This disconnectedness trivializes much of what students are asked to learn.

We know all of this intuitively. While this knowledge causes many in schools to make occasional forays into the community—a walk to the park in relation to a science

project, going to the local library so every student will get a library card, inviting in a couple of persons each year to share some aspect of their experience, having a cultural awareness day related to the special ethnic origins of a dominant community group, having students go sporadically to a senior citizen center or read to children in a lower grade level—such efforts tend to be viewed as special events surrounding the real work of the school. This is the case even as teachers and their students often view these efforts as the highlights of the school year.

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I believe we owe it to our young people to assure that they are deeply involved with their communities, that they leave the schools eager to take an active part in the political and cultural systems that surround them. Enlarging our vision of the school is, therefore, important. Covello understood this extremely well. He provides us many examples of how to proceed.

.....

John Dewey spoke of schools as centers for democratic education, having as a central purpose the formation of a democratic society. Covello understood this more fully than most American educators. He saw the Benjamin Franklin Community School as the epitome of Dewey's democratic conception, constructed around the view that community well being was an essential purpose. He wrote, in relation to this tie between schools and their surrounding communities (which, at the time, as is the case today in many of our urban settings, were filled with immigrant families, living through a myriad of cultural conflicts) that the schools "occupied a unique position..." (Covello, 1936).

> *It is the only social agency that has direct contact with practically every family within the community and the education law makes this contact with the family compulsory from the early childhood to the late adolescence of every boy and girl. This is important when one realizes that the public-school system functions in a city which has a population of close to seven million people, of whom one million two hundred thousand go to school... To accomplish [its mission on behalf of immigrants] it is necessary first to allay the distrust and the antagonism that have risen out of misunderstanding and indifference. Disruptive forces must be replaced with a spirit of friendliness and intelligent cooperation in the building of wholesome social and civic relationships. Leonard Covello, "A High School and Its Immigrant Community: A Challenge and an Opportunity," Journal of Educational Sociology, vol. 9 (Feb. 1936), p.1, 340.*

To say that the schools should be community centers does not mean that they were fulfilling such roles. He noted in this regard:

> *Has the school really felt the life of the community pulsating beyond its four walls? Has it made an attempt to realize the problems and difficulties with which the immigrant neighborhood is faced? Has it answered the community call for help and its need and longing for guidance? To what extent has the school penetrated into the community, analyzing, encouraging, and developing its latent educational forces, and helping to counteract the forces of disorganization that apparently even the highly organized society of today seems unable to curb even in the better*

ordered communities? ("A High School and Its Immigrant Community" in Public, p. 219)

How did Covello describe the aims of the Benjamin Franklin Community School? What did he believe should be the aims of all schools? I outline below several of his definitions:

• The community-centered school is a school that reaches out into the community in order to make available to the community all of the resources of education.

• It implies an educational program based upon the principles of democracy in that it seeks to draw the community into conference with the school in order to determine the needs of individual students, the needs of the community as a whole, and the needs of the school, in relation to the community.

• The community-centered school endeavors to prepare its students for intelligent leadership and intelligent participation in community and national life by providing opportunities for leadership and participation while the student is yet in school.

• The community-centered school accepts responsibility for the social well-being of the community, as well as for the educational training of students committed to the care of the school.

• In carrying forward its program, the community-centered school can function successfully only if it be willing to become the friend and neighbor, as well as educational leader of the community. There must be understanding and cooperation between the school and the community before either can carry out its full responsibility in relation to the youth of the community.

• The program of the community-centered school, therefore, must be all-inclusive; it must be as broad as itself; it must be rooted in the human needs, the human aspirations, and the human capabilities of the individuals that comprise the community. (From Covello, "A High School and Its Immigrant Community," Journal of Educational Sociology, vol. IX, No. 6 (Feb. 1931) pp. 345-346.

This Community School conception is certainly rooted in democratic principles. Why is it so difficult to put such principles into practice? Our continuing task is to link communities and schools, to see them as integrally related, mutually dependent on one another.

.....

The Community Advisory Council was the vehicle for coordinating the work of Benjamin Franklin as a community school. Covello wrote about its virtues as follows:

Our whole Community Advisory Council approach is predicated on the thesis that there should be a greater correlation between the neighborhood social agencies and the school... Our teachers should know more about the educational work of

the settlement houses and the settlement houses should know more about the social progress of the schools. (from Covello Papers-Community Advisory Council File, in Peebles, p. 215).

A student participant in the Community Advisory Council wrote his own statement.

There was a time when the school was merely a place in which certain subjects were taught to children and that was all. That time is, I believe, past. The school is now the center of the community. From its position there radiate many channels of neighborhood activity. This activity, as carried on in Benjamin Franklin High School, is absolutely necessary. Especially is it necessary in a large city like New York, which contains so many communities, each with its own problems.

We... are striving to establish our school as a place where all may get together and discuss the problems peculiar to our own district. In order to do this, leaders in the community and institutions such as library heads, hospitals, social workers, welfare organizations and political leaders are asked to join our various community advisory groups. In such groups the student should certainly not be forgotten. He is often more acutely aware of neighborhood problems than are his elders... The school might very well be a meeting ground where parent and child could get together. Very often the parent does not understand English which is all the more reason for the schools taking a hand. In Franklin we haven't a 'Parent-Teachers Association', but a 'Parent, Teachers and Friends' organization. Now among these friends might very well be included the parents' children. We shouldn't have open school 'week' but rather - open school year. This will come about naturally as the school interests itself in community affairs. (Covello Papers, in Peebles, p. 215-216).

The struggle for low-cost housing in East Harlem was led by a student-community committee associated with the Benjamin Franklin School. As was the case with virtually every community issue undertaken, study, research, and community education and participation were embedded activities.

The housing drive began with research on various existing conceptions of urban housing, followed by model building and drawings (rooted in the research and developed within existing areas of East Harlem) along with original models developed by students. These formed a large exhibition to educate the community.

At the same time, speculators were trying to buy up East River frontage for expensive apartment complexes. Covello notes:

To permit this would have been an injustice to the people of the community....we organized more meetings, held parades through the streets of East Harlem, distributed leaflets asking for the help of every man, woman and child in our efforts to obtain better housing for our people. We circulated hundreds of petitions addressed to the Mayor and the NY City Housing Authority... (p.219-229).

As it turned out, the community won a great victory, and engaged in a large community celebration, as funds were approved for low rent housing adjacent to East

River Drive. It became a model for additional efforts to acquire more housing for the community.

.....

Getting a new high school building had many of the qualities of the work on housing. The larger struggle, in the end, revolved around the site. The students settled on the East River Drive site.

> *'Why shouldn't we have the most beautiful location for our school?' everyone asked.*
>
> *The answer was that this site would probably cost more than any of the others. The students took matters into their own hands. Shortly after this, at a radio panel discussion, they had a chance to discuss this same question of site with Mayor LaGuardia. 'The East River location is much more expensive,' he said. 'I'm afraid we'll have to settle for one of the others.'*
>
> *The spokesman for the student committee got up. 'Mr. Mayor,' he said, 'our social-studies teachers arranged for us to make a study of land values. We checked the record and we found that according to the assessed valuation, the East River Drive site would actually cost less than any of the others.'*
>
> *Mayor LaGuardia seemed flustered for a moment. Then with the humor and poise characteristic of him, he said, 'We'll discuss it after the program, boys.'*
>
> *In fact, after the radio program, the Mayor had quite a talk with the students... 'If you're right,' he said, wagging a pudgy finger, 'and I believe you are, I will do everything possible to make this the site for the new school.' (p.228)*

The school was opened in April 1942. Covello notes of the dedication ceremony:

> *War colored the entire ceremony that day. Mayor LaGuardia reminded the boys that whether or not the war ended before they could serve in it, they would face another war against dislocated conditions and that they had to bring themselves to realize the enormity of their responsibilities and prepare for them.*
>
> *As I stood up on the platform of our magnificent auditorium, capable of seating thirteen hundred people, facing my students, my friends and neighbors of East Harlem, I could hardly speak. 'To those of us who have lived and worked in this community for many years,' I said, 'this occasion marks the fulfillment of a long cherished dream-the dream of transforming dirt and ugliness into spaciousness and beauty, of bringing light into darkness....'*
>
> *In speaking about the program of the school, I added, 'Fulfilling the ideal of Community Service to which it has been dedicated, the Benjamin Franklin High School will now operate on a round-the-clock program of use by all community organizations. Believing that a school building should be available to all the members of the community, all the time, the Board of Education has conferred a signal honor on Benjamin Franklin High School.*
>
> *By a special vote it has decreed that our building is to be open every hour of every day of the year. This means that we who live and work in East Harlem are free to use its magnificent resources at all times.' (p.230).*

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