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REMARKS OF DR. LEONARD COVELLO UPON ACCEPTANCE OF THE MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK.

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HIGHLIGHTED IN THESE REMARKS ARE THE EXPERIENCES OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL, A COMMUNITY-CENTERED SCHOOL IN EAST HARLEM, FROM ITS BEGINNINGS IN 1934 TO THE PRESENT. AT THE OUTSET, A COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL WAS FORMED TO DEAL WITH PROBLEMS OF CITIZENSHIP, PARENT EDUCATION, RACE, AND JUVENILE AID, AND, AT ONE POINT IN THE SCHOOL'S HISTORY, IT CAMPAIGNED SUCCESSFULLY FOR A LOW INCOME HOUSING PROJECT AND FOR ADDITIONAL PERSONNEL FOR THE SCHOOL. DURING THIS TIME THE SCHOOL'S MANY AUXILIARY ACTIVITIES (YEAR-ROUND DAY SCHOOL AND EDUCATIONAL AND RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS) WERE MADE POSSIBLE WITH THE ADDITIONAL PERSONNEL ASSIGNED TO THE SCHOOL BY THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION AND THROUGH THE RESOURCES OF THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY. AT A LATER TIME, STORE FRONTS NEAR THE SCHOOL WERE RENTED FOR COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING THE HISPANIC-AMERICAN BUREAU, WHICH, ALONG WITH OTHER SERVICES, SERVED THE EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS OF THE GROWING NEIGHBORHOOD PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY. IN CONTRAST WITH BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S ENCOURAGING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT, IN THE CURRENT CASE OF INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL 201 IN EAST HARLEM THE PROPOSAL FOR A SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COMMITTEE TO ADMINISTER THE SCHOOL WAS COMMUNITY-INITIATED. THIS PROPOSAL, IT IS FELT, AFFORDS THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY TO COOPERATE TO FIND SOLUTIONS TO EXISTING EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS. (JL)

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REMARKS OF DR. LEONARD COVELLO

upon acceptance
of the

Meritorious Service Medal
of the

Department of State of the State of New York

Presentation of the Meritorious Service Award
by

Hon. John F. Lomenzo
Secretary of State
State of New York

at the

Benjamin Franklin High School
East Harlem, New York City

December 14, 1966

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Introductory Note

The statement which follows does two things: it allows a distinguished educator to point up some of the highlights of his twenty-two years at the Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem-- years which have become one of the truly great chapters in the history of the achievement of the American public school.

It also gives a clear picture of the basic philosophy which animates the Community Centered School, and which impinges so strongly on the contemporary educational challenge in the ghettos of our American cities.

The Department of State of the State of New York is to be commended not only for the conferment of its award to Dr. Leonard Covello, but congratulated on its perceptive awareness of the great service that our schools and their leaders have made to the achievement of American social ideals.

Frank M. Cordasco
Professor of Education
Montclair State College

Judge Lomenzo, I want to express my deep appreciation to you as Secretary of the Department of State of the State of New York, for having conferred on me, this very high honor.

May I accept this award not only as a tribute to myself, but as a tribute to my colleagues and co-workers-- teachers, parents, East Harlem Societies and Organizations, and my former students whose cooperative efforts made possible whatever was achieved.

I want to express my appreciation to those who have spoken here tonight and to the organizations which they represent and which have sponsored this community event-- the East Harlem Civic Association and its President, Ugo Perez; the Instituto de Puerto Rico and its President Luis Quero Chiesa; the East Harlem Council for Community Planning and its Chairman, Carl Flemister, and the Migration Division of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and its National Director, Joseph Monserrat, Franklin '39.

I also want to thank all those who are honoring me with their presence here tonight.

Special thanks are due to Miss Rita Collins, Assistant Secretary of State for the State of New York, and to Luisa Quintero feature writer and columnist for El Diario, for their help in planning this program.

You can well understand how gratifying it is for me to be receiving this award in the school and in the community which has meant and means so much to me.

Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem was organized in June 1934, during the Great Depression-- a disaster which shook the nation to its very foundations. It was a period of fears and doubts and questions about every aspect of our American way of life. Searching questions were raised as to the role of the public school in our American communities. It was in 1932 that Professor George Counts of Teachers College, Columbia University, wrote his challenging book: Dare the School Build A New Social Order.

There was a need for a high school for boys in the East Harlem community. The high school came into being through the united, persistent and untiring efforts of the people of the East Harlem community and concerned people outside the community.

At that time, De Witt Clinton High School located in the North Bronx had a register of 11,000 boys. 6,000 were in the main building and 5,000 were in five annexes. Two of the annexes (old elementary schools) on the East Side of Manhattan were made available for the new school and 1,800 boys were transferred to constitute the student body of the Benjamin Franklin High School.

There were two educational experiences that gave direction to the educational program of the Benjamin Franklin High School.

One was the East Harlem Boys' Club Study 1928-1934; the other was the program of the Department of Italian at the De Witt Clinton High School from 1921-1934.

In 1927 the Boys' Club of New York established the Jefferson Park Boys Club in a new building on 111th Street near 2nd Avenue, to provide a program to counteract the high juvenile delinquency in East Harlem. In 1928, by a grant made available through the Department of Sociology of the School of Education, New York University, a study was undertaken to determine the effects of the Jefferson Park Boys Club of New York on the youth of the East Harlem community, and on the community itself.

Professor Frederic Thrasher, a nationally known sociologist and author of The Gang- A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago, came from the University of Chicago to New York to direct this study.

At the time this study was undertaken, I was Chairman of the Department of Italian at the De Witt Clinton High School, located at 59th Street and 10th Avenue, and Lecturer in the School of Education at New York University. Due to the fact that one-third of the 1,000 students in the Italian Department were living in East Harlem, Dr. Thrasher asked the cooperation of our Department in this study. So that the Italian Department staff, the teachers-in-training, and some of the Italian students living in East Harlem all became involved in this study in various capacities. In our participation in this study, in the numerous discussions, conferences and seminars at New York University and in the East Harlem community, the question constantly arose as to what should be the role of the school in relation to the many serious problems facing the East Harlem community- a community in which almost 80% of its 200,000 people were of foreign stock:- an immigrant community, confronted with the ever occurring problem of the second-generation-foreign-born children and children of foreign-born parents.

The Boys Club Study made two very important contributions: One, it stimulated the East Harlem community to campaign for a high school for its boys who had to travel long distances to get an education; and two, it gave us a thorough and extensive sociological study of every aspect of community life in East Harlem.

The Italian Department at the De Witt Clinton High School began with one class in 1920 and by 1928, had a register of 1,000 students with a full four year course, and two 4th year classes. Cooperating with the Italian Teachers Association, parity for the Italian language was established in 1922 after a ten year campaign. For during that period school authorities felt that having Italian students study the Italian language would segregate them from other students and retard their "Americanization"- an old and often repeated story-- an idea with which we very definitely took issue.

The Italian Department was not only concerned with the study of the Italian language and the appreciation of the culture of Italy, but also, through its club activities, sponsored many

Italian programs in the Italo-American communities of the city. It put on performances of Italian plays, music and folk dances in settlement houses, churches, schools and Italian Society centers. At these performances the students assumed the important role of speaking to the parents, urging them to keep their children in school to achieve at least a high school diploma, and stressing the importance of having their children study the Italian language. Some of these students were trained to teach English to Italian immigrants and to help them obtain their American citizenship papers in centers in East Harlem and on the lower East Side of the city.

The alumni and senior students of the Department established Help Classes for the younger students who were having a difficult time maintaining themselves in High School. Home visiting was also carried on by older students and teachers.

In 1929 the Department of Italian created the first Italian Parent Teachers Association at De Witt Clinton even before the high school itself had a Parent Teachers Association.

A Department and Club magazine Il Foro was launched and students were given the opportunity to carry on this very valuable activity.

The purpose of all these varied activities was to stimulate the young Italo-American student not only to aspire and to achieve for his own personal advancement, but also to give him an opportunity to serve.

In the course of these activities, we all gained a great deal of insight into the problems that Italo-Americans were facing in our city- in the "Little Italies" of that period. So that when Benjamin Franklin High School was organized, there was already the conviction that for this school to carry out an effective educational program, it had to involve itself in the life of the community. So we attempted to create a Community-Oriented -- a Community-Centered School.

Through the creation of a Community Advisory Council of the Benjamin Franklin High School which included in its membership business and professional groups, religious groups, educational organizations, civic associations, foreign language societies and press, prominent community citizens, social agencies, municipal departments and students of the high school, the school took the initiative and became involved in problems affecting the community: housing, health, citizenship, parent education, racial problems, juvenile aid, etc. In this way the school reached out into the community in an attempt to make the people realize that education must have a broad social basis and should not confine its program only to the academic aspects of education.

Of course, we were interested and concerned about the academic values of the high school program. The basic knowledges and skills that students derive from the various disciplines were and are tremendously important. Reading at least at grade

level was and is very important; but we were also concerned with the social aspects of education- with widening the scope and function of our high school program. We wanted community involvement and participation. We wanted to ally ourselves with the wholesome forces in our community to bring about better and more wholesome community living. We felt that academic subjects should not be an end in themselves but should be utilized to achieve these broader social purposes. And student involvement was one of the very important objectives in all our plans.

It was possible through the personnel assigned by the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) and our own school and community resources for the school to function on an all-year round basis with a day school, afternoon and evening educational and recreational programs, and a summer school. The W.P.A. workers assigned to the school did an extraordinary job, particularly in the Remedial Reading Programs of the English and Social Studies Departments of the high school. At one period of the All-Year Round educational program, the W.P.A. assigned ninety-six (96) workers to carry on our many and varied activities.

One of the very active Committees of the Community Advisory Council was the Housing Committee. This School Community Committee worked consistently over a three year period, in the campaign to establish the East River Houses on the East River Drive- the first low income Housing Project in East Harlem. It also campaigned for the new Benjamin Franklin High School also on the East River Drive- or "The East Riviera" as we called it, using as our campaign slogan "A New School in a New Community." And we just missed out on a badly needed hospital! After much solicitous and continued effort, the High School Division of the New York City Board of Education granted the school an extra position for a Community-School Coordinator- an unprecedented concession, and probably the first of its kind in the city. However, we failed in achieving an equally important position- a Director of Intercultural Education functioning city-wide in the High School Division.

In order to work more closely and more intimately with the community, we rented five store-fronts on 108th Street close to the main building of the high school. These store-fronts were used for a Friends and Neighbors Club for general meeting purposes, an Hispanic-American Educational Bureau, an Italo-American Educational Bureau, a Community Library and an Alumni Club Center.

We conducted a Sanitation Drive to make our streets cleaner and more wholesome. We created a Playlot- the forerunner of the present Vest Pocket Parks. We published the East Harlem News- jointly sponsored by the school and the community. For we wanted to create a Voice for the East Harlem community- a Voice which was non-existent in those days and which was badly needed- and for which there is an even more urgent need today.

Before the Second World War, there was a very substantial Puerto Rican community in East Harlem- "El Barrio"- the pioneer

and largest Puerto Rican community in New York City. To help meet the educational and social needs of our Puerto Rican people, the Community Advisory Council of the school sponsored an Hispanic-Educational Bureau using one of the school's store-fronts to carry out its program jointly with the Italo-American Educational Bureau which occupied an adjoining store-front. With the ending of the Second World War, programs for our Puerto Rican students and people were increased and expanded. A Puerto Rican Parent Teachers Association was organized, planning its own programs and using Spanish at their meetings and social events. A students' Borinquen Club gave the Puerto Rican students of the school an opportunity to sponsor programs in the school and in the community, and to acquire understanding and appreciation of the culture of their people.

In 1948-1949 a series of Press Conferences- eighteen in all- were sponsored by the school and the Puerto Rican leaders. Directors of public agencies in New York City and New York State in the fields of education, welfare, social work, law enforcement, civil service, labor etc were invited to discuss the programs of their agencies with Puerto Rican leaders and representatives of the Hispanic press. Journalists of the caliber of Luisa Quintero, Babby Quintero, Teofilo Maldonado and Arnaldo Meyners conveyed the necessary information derived from these conferences to the Puerto Rican community. The students of the Borinquen Club were hosts and participated in these conferences.

Six Annual Latin-American Festivals organized by Babby Quintero and Luisa Quintero, and directed by Babby Quintero, were held at the school in the auditorium filled to capacity. These festivals not only provided four to five hours of colorful entertainment but drew the Puerto Rican family into the school.

It may be of interest to note here that in 1951 the first substantial study of the "Puerto Rican Child in the New York City's Public Schools" involving seventy-five (75) Elementary and Junior High Schools, sponsored by the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs, was made through the resources of the Benjamin Franklin High School.

I have tried to point up very briefly and inadequately some of the highlights of our experience in our attempt to create a Community School--a Community-Centered School--a school that would serve its community. It was the school that took the initiative. It was the school reaching out into the community, seeking and stressing and urging cooperative action.

Today in East Harlem we have a reverse situation. It is the community taking the initiative. It is the community seeking involvement in one of its newly built schools at 127th Street and Madison Avenue. This past year in the new Intermediate School 201 in East Harlem, the local community-- parents, local leaders, lay and professional people concerned and troubled by the lack of progress of their children in our East Harlem Community schools, have been seeking to create an effective and continuing

relationship between the school and the local community. The basic feature of their proposal is the creation of a School-Community Committee as an integral part of the school to function both in the school and in the community. The functions and responsibilities that this School Community Committee would assume have generated a controversy that has involved the Mayor of the City, the Board of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, the United Parents Association, the Public Education Association and the supervisory staff of the schools. The issues involved have by no means been resolved- just an uneasy truce. The local press has given ample, if not completely satisfactory coverage, to this controversy.

To me, the proposal made by this local School-Community Committee represents one of the most significant educational events that has occurred in my long career as a teacher in the public schools of our city. For at long last, it is the community which is taking the initiative- it is the community now seeking involvement in the education of its children. For decades our schools have been living in a continual state of crisis which can only be eliminated by bold, imaginative and even extreme measures. For decades our New York City schools have suffered consistently and grievously with inadequate budgets, over-sized classes, heavy teaching schedules, shortage of essential materials and working conditions that have made it difficult and at times impossible to do a good teaching job. As teachers we have deplored the lack of general public support, lack of parent cooperation for strengthening public education and creating quality education for all our children. For the best interests of the child are served when a concerned body of local people is intimately involved with the school program, and therein strengthens immeasurable the total educational experience of the child.

The proposals of a School Community Committee for I.S. 201 extreme as they may appear, afford an unusual opportunity to help create the kind of schools that we have envisioned. Let us not reject and condemn utterly this community effort. Let us continue to "reason together" to find the solution. The basic idea of community involvement in the school in the education of the child is sound. For what may appear unconventional, extreme or even impossible today, can become the reality of tomorrow. Let's go forward for a better tomorrow.