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Schools That Serve The Community

A HIGH SCHOOL AND ITS IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY
A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY

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A HIGH SCHOOL AND ITS IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY—A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY

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In New York City, the public-school system occupies not only an important strategic position but also a unique position in the life of the community. 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.

In a city of the size of New York, with a population made up mainly of comparatively recent migrations from every nook and corner of the world, a study of the composition and characteristics of the population is a vital necessity.

The total population of New York City, according to the United States Census for 1930, was 6,930,446. An analysis of the population figures of this Census brings out certain significant and educationally important facts, as follows:

Native stock { 1,505,200 or 21.7 per cent of the population
 { is *native white* of *native parents*

Foreign stock { 2,788,625 or 40.2 per cent is *native white* of
 { *foreign-born parents*
 { 2,293,400 or 33.1 per cent is *foreign born*
 { 343,221 or 5.0 per cent is *Negroes and others*

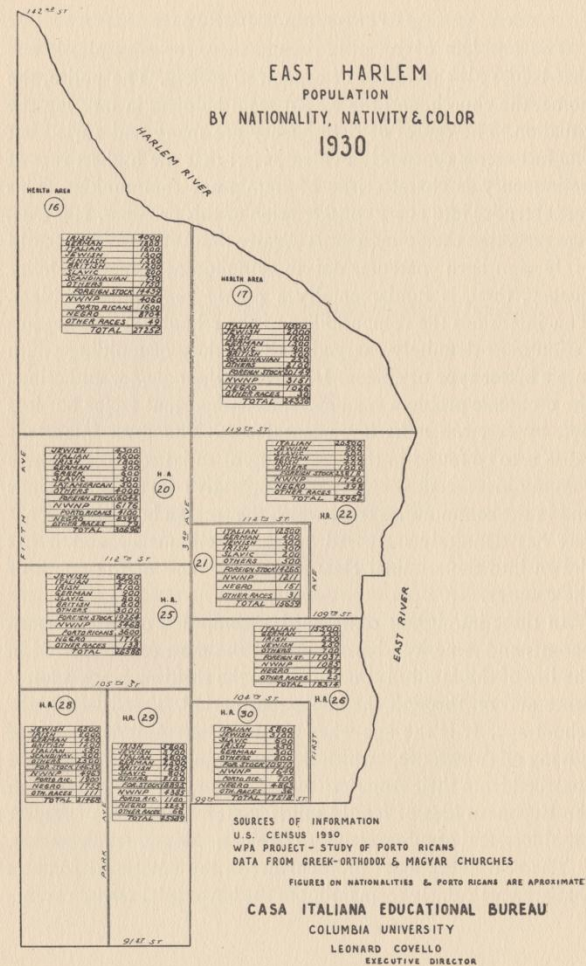
The fact that 73 per cent of the population of New York City is of foreign stock is, of course, very significant.

In general the composition and characteristics of the popula-

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tion of New York as shown by the United States Census of 1930 are true for the East Harlem community in Manhattan in which the main building of the Benjamin Franklin High School is located. The high school draws its student body largely from this community whose total population is 233,400, according to the United States Census of 1930. Of this total, 20,888 or 9.0 per cent are native white of native parents. Of the foreign stock, 13,000 or 5.6 per cent are Porto Rican; 86,174 or 35.7 per cent are native white of foreign parents; 83,345 or 36.9 per cent are foreign born; 29,422 or 12.7 per cent are Negroes; and 571 or .1 per cent other groups. As these figures show, in the section where the Community Advisory Council of the school is concentrating its efforts, 78.2 per cent of the residents is of foreign stock. It is estimated that about a third of the population is of Italian origin. There is also a rapidly increasing population of Spanish-speaking peoples, mainly Porto Rican, while there is, and has been, a correspondingly rapidly diminishing population of people of Jewish, Irish, and German stock.

These facts are educationally important. The school, in order to be effective, must keep constantly in mind the fact that it is dealing with a heterogeneous population, new to American soil, transplanted here in haste, and only now beginning to take root. This new immigration is still struggling with a bilingual problem, is still facing all types of difficulties in trying to adapt itself to the varying, quickly shifting, and confusing standards of social behavior. It is still living under emotional stress because it has been unable to adjust itself adequately to the speed and complexity of our industrial and commercial life. It is still incapable of adjusting itself to the tempo of American life. This condition is further aggravated by the fact that these communities are often isolated from the more wholesome forces in our American life. These things create problems difficult to solve and present both an obligation and an opportunity to the school.



JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

The problem of juvenile delinquency, for example, is one that baffles all the forces of organized society. The police, the home, the church, and the school seem helpless in meeting the situation. The causes of delinquency are many and varied but one fact seems constantly evident, viz.: that the highest rate of delinquency is characteristic of immigrant communities. This fact obtrudes into every consideration of this problem. It is true, however, that the delinquent is usually the American-born child of foreign-born parents, not the immigrant himself. Delinquency, then, is fundamentally a *second generation* problem. This intensifies the responsibility of the school, the one organization most definitely charged with the duty of molding youth into a better type of citizen. In juvenile delinquency and crime, the economic problem is an extremely important factor but it is not, by far, *the* most important factor. The most important cause is to be found in the weakening of social controls in these communities—controls that were operative in the homelands and in the communities from which the foreign born came. That fact has definitely increased juvenile delinquency and it has drawn into the criminal class more and more of the youth of the country.

In these immigrant communities, composed of foreign-born parents and American-born children, the most critical period in the life of the family is that in which the children reach adolescence and on through the adolescent period. This is the high-school age. It is the age when the so-called American idea of "living one's own life," which the immigrant-born children have absorbed from their American environment, begins to clash with the European idea of family solidarity, of obedience, of respect for elders, and of subservience to family needs and requirements.

The real educational problem lies in the emotional conflicts that are particularly tormenting to the boy or girl whose parents

still have both feet planted firmly and deeply in centuries of European tradition and custom. With these established traditions and customs, the younger generation is often in conflict. There is often a feeling of scorn and shame in the children of the foreign born because of the pressure of adverse opinion from without their own racial group. This often produces an anti-social attitude that is dangerous to the boy and dangerous for the community. This antisocial attitude is largely the fertile breeding ground for the crime and delinquency that present such a disturbing problem for school and society.

THE SCHOOL AND FORTY MILLION NEW AMERICANS

The situation thus briefly outlined is not peculiar to any one community alone. Conditions of this nature prevail not only in many communities in New York City but in practically all industrial centers where the new immigrant has sought work and tried to found a home. Out of a total population of about 125,000,000, approximately 40,000,000—or one third of the people of the United States—are of foreign stock. For these people in their foreign communities a more wholesome community life must be evolved. It is difficult to do this, particularly at this late stage. The problem of assimilation and of cultural harmony, the development of a wholesome national consciousness in the midst of great cultural diversity, the clash of racial and nationality interests are really basic problems—and they must be the chief concern of the school because to the school is entrusted the education of the future citizens.

Unfortunately, the school, in the past, has failed to realize fully the importance of these problems; neither has it perceived definitely the extent of its influence in arriving at a happy solution of the difficulties peculiar to the immigrant's unfixed and unrecognized American status.

Let us for a moment ask: What role has the public school

played in immigrant or foreign communities in which it is located? What role is it playing today? 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 the 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?

The answer to all these questions, unfortunately, is very discouraging. The school, in the past, has met few, if any, of these problems. However, there seems to be at present an awakening sense of duty and of opportunity that may produce a changed outlook and a stronger influence for progress in the future. The school is reaching out for the contacts and the program that will provide a basis for effective work. To function successfully, it must know not only the social and educational background of its boys and girls, but it must also go one step further; it must strive to understand the individual child in his social relationships outside of school. More important still, it must play an active and aggressive part in the affairs of the community. The school must assume the role demanded by its very nature; it must be the leader and the coordinating agency in all educational enterprises affecting the life of the community and, to a certain extent, the pivot upon which much even of the social and civic life of the neighborhood shall turn. There can be no denial of the fact that there are, outside the school, vital, powerful, and compelling forces that are constantly educating the boys and girls of the community in spite of, or contrary to, the school ideal. The surging life of the community as a whole, its motion-

picture houses, its dance halls, its streets, its gangs, its churches, its community houses, its community codes of behavior and morals—these will either promote or destroy the work of the school.

The Benjamin Franklin High School soon realized this fact and set about organizing a Community Advisory Council. This Council proposes to bring to the aid of the school all the constructive forces within the East Harlem district so as to combat the many disruptive forces of the community. The main building of the high school itself is in the heart of an immigrant community that seems to have suffered from an almost malevolent concentration of those factors in modern industrial life that warp human development. Unsanitary dwellings, congested housing, lack of play space, unsightly streets, low economic returns for the wage earner, exploitation of the worker and often of his whole family, lack of proper opportunities in all the varying phases of life—all these things have contributed to the deterioration of the East Harlem neighborhood into what is known as a "tough" district among those who are unfamiliar with the potential human values basic in the people and in the life of the community. The fact that there is a widespread lack of understanding of these inherent values in the immigrant centers throughout the Nation creates problems that should be of interest to progressive educators.

A COMMUNITY-CENTER PROGRAM

The Benjamin Franklin High School is merely feeling its way toward what may be a proper solution of these problems. The school naturally sought, from the beginning, to identify itself closely with the social and educational agencies in the community. Members of the faculty were asked to serve on committees of the Yorkville Civic Council and the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies. The principal of the school was elected vice-president of the latter organization, while the main