

# Portrait of an Educator

## Leonard Covello

Leonard Covello was—and still is—a legendary educator for many New Yorkers. He was the principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem in New York City from the time he founded the school in 1934 to 1956. Born in Italy, Covello came to New York's East Harlem when he was 9. He dropped out of high school, eventually returned, graduated from Columbia University, and earned a Ph.D. at New York University. Though deeply loyal to his Italian community, and somewhat disillusioned with his own educational experience in New York and at Columbia, Covello found his true calling as a teacher. From 1914 to 1934, with a short break for service in the U.S. Army, Covello taught at De Witt Clinton High School in New York and also developed his own ideas of what a true community-based high school should look like, building on many of the ideas that had been in circulation among progressive educators for half a century, but also taking them in his own direction.

When Covello was given the chance to open a new high school for boys in the ethnically diverse immigrant community of East Harlem in 1934, he sought to create a school that was intimately tied to, rather than cut off from, the surrounding community. In his autobiography, *The Heart Is the Teacher*, Covello wrote, "What was in the back of my mind was a neighborhood school which would be the educational, civic, and social center of the community. We wanted to go beyond the traditional subject-centered and the current child-centered school to the community-centered school." Covello was making important distinctions. He wanted students to learn so that they would succeed in life, but he thought the traditional subject-specific approach to teaching and learning bored students and cut learning off from their own experience. He was also critical of the individualistic approach that some progressive educators had taken with their version of child-centered pedagogy. His approach to academic work sounded very much like what would later be called *problem-based education*. For example, a Covello syllabus said, "Each student will be asked to select a problem and follow it through the field of American literature . . . each group will report to the class at stated intervals on the results of and the inferences to be drawn from their reading." At the same time, Paula Fass, author of one of the major studies of Covello's work said, "[H]is efforts were praised by contemporaries and have remained a model of cultural contact aimed at alleviation of the conflicts between the school and the local community within which it was often an alien presence."

For Covello, the key to managing and motivating a group of students (in his case, young boys, many of whom were immigrants or the children of immigrants from Italy as well as Africa, the West Indies, Ireland, Germany, Austria, Poland, and later increasingly from Puerto Rico, and many other parts of the world) was to make the school a community—their community—and to organize the school so that students used it as a base to address and help resolve problems in their own home communities. This was more than civic engagement: it was involving students, and the whole school, in discovering the underlying causes of community problems and finding ways to bring about real change. With such a focus, Covello believed, students would achieve academically, be much easier to manage (for they were self-managing), and make real contributions to their home community, not just in the future but while they were students.

After he retired from his position in 1956, Covello stayed active in education. He worked closely with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in its efforts to help Puerto Rican immigrants adjust to their new life in New York City. He also served as an informal advisor to a group of parents and civil rights advocates who were seeking much greater community control of the large New York City school system during the 1960s. He died in Italy in 1982 at the age of 95, after a decade of work helping to reform education in Sicily.

Sources: Leonard Covello with Guido D'Agostino, *The Heart Is the Teacher*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958, p. 182; Michael C. Johanek and John L. Puckett, *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007, p. 137; and Paula S. Fass, *Outside In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 57.

### Thinking about Leonard Covello:

- Do you think Covello was romantic or realistic in his ideas about students?

- Covello was a principal more than 50 years ago. What has changed and what has not changed that might make his ideas relevant or irrelevant today?
- Once Covello left, most of the programs he built at Benjamin Franklin High School disappeared. What does that say about his leadership?

You can learn more about Covello's life and work by exploring the following Web links and publications.

### **The Educator's Life:**

#### [Covello Biography](http://www2.hsp.org/collections/balch%20manuscript_guide/html/covello.html)

Biographical notes from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, along with Covello's publications and further resources.

[http://www2.hsp.org/collections/balch%20manuscript\\_guide/html/covello.html](http://www2.hsp.org/collections/balch%20manuscript_guide/html/covello.html)

### **Related Work and Research:**

#### **Ethnic Students in New York City**

A look at ethnic students in seven New York City high schools, including Covello's experiences and insights.

Fass, Paula. *Outside In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education*, Oxford University Press, 1991.

#### **Citizenship and Benjamin Franklin High School**

Authors suggest new approaches for educating today's students to be better "public citizens" by using the 20-year history of community-centered schooling at Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem as a case study.

Johanek, Michael C., and Puckett, John L. *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School: Education As If Citizenship Mattered*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007.

#### **Revisiting *The Heart Is the Teacher***

Vito Perrone revisits Leonard Covello's *The Heart Is the Teacher*. By looking at Covello's work and educational commitments, Perrone calls attention to matters such as immigrant students, intercultural education, advocacy for students and families, and community schools.

Perrone, Vito. *Teacher With a Heart: Reflections on Leonard Covello and Community*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.

### **Selected Publications:**

Covello, Leonard. *The Heart is the Teacher*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1958.

Covello, Leonard. *The Social Background of the Italo-American School Child*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962.