



New Jersey Council of Education

THE COUNCIL EMERGES:

ITS TIME HAD COME

Why does an organization come into being? Usually because the time is ripe for its advent, or because a charismatic individual grasps a public opportunity to proclaim his/her vision.

Public education in New Jersey in 1886 was not a highly organized activity. It was extremely decentralized – as was natural when communication and transportation difficulties made state advisories and controls extremely tenuous. It was a time, however, when leadership talents of individuals whose views and concerns surmounted local boundaries quickly acquired prominence.

Dr. Clarence E. Meleney was a man who possessed such talents. He was the Superintendent of Paterson schools. He had been in New Jersey only eight years, but he already as the President of New Jersey State Teachers' Association, later New Jersey Education Association, which had been founded in 1853.

However, the New Jersey State Teachers' Association was not able to mount the very comprehensive program of services it now provides. Dr. Meleney, as president of the organization, could see this fact. For the achievement of some of his clearly perceived objectives, he realized that another force would have to be created.

"We need," he often insisted, "a cadre of eminent educators whose prestige and stature can be brought to bear on legislators and others holding the 'purse strings' of public funds. Only such a group can hasten the day when the public schools will enroll all children, wherever they live, and educate them well." In that statement lay the blueprint of what eventually was organized as The New Jersey Council of Education.

During the 1886 convention of the New Jersey State Teachers' Association, he, in detail, described the potential functions of the visualized new organization:

"Some of the subjects to be considered by the Council include the present condition of school discipline; the result of the (1867) law prohibiting corporal punishment; what to do with truants and incorrigible pupils; what is our duty as educators to the untaught vagrants; what can be done to enlighten communities on school matters and convince them of our needs; what legislation should be enacted in regard to compulsory education and child labor; how may the present laws be more effectively enforced; what is the best method of obtaining school boards; what would be the effect of appointing women on school boards; what is the best method of conducting teachers' examinations and granting certificates; to what extent should temperance be taught; it is not important to teach the importance of labor; should not more attention be given to instruction in the principles of our government."

As the French say, "Plus ça change, plus c' est la même chose." The President of the NJEA could make a remarkably similar speech today concerning the problems of public education.

To fill critical needs in public education, the stage was set for the formation of the New Jersey Council of Education, to occur in the year following Dr. Meleney's exhortation. And, in every year since its formation, one can very truthfully state that the need for a very strong Council of Education has remained constant: "a cadre of eminent educators with prestige and stature."