



New Jersey Council of Education

THE COUNCIL EMERGES: THE RECENT PAST AND A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

At the beginning of the 1970's, it became apparent that the Council of Education was ready to relinquish its quiescent role and to implement more energetically its own constitution, which calls for it to investigate and discuss topics relating to education and to disseminate information bearing on these topics. Also, by constitutional edict the Council is called upon "to consider and recommend the best means of advancing the educational interests of the State, including the taking of positions on, reacting to, and providing support for critical issues." Thus, under the whiplash of its constitutional mandate, the Council, with its unique and powerful membership, began to accept the challenge of leadership in a time of rapid change, and it also started to raise its voice in loud and clear tones concerning pressing educational matters.

Perhaps at no other time since the early years did the Council take as many firm stands on crucial educational issues at it did in the 1970's and early 1980's. The scene was one of a recently elected Governor and a newly appointed Commissioner of Education. Council members began to view the immediate future with a large measure of dark foreboding. There appeared to be good and sufficient reasons for this feeling.

Educators began to notice that vacancies in the State Board of Education and in county superintendents' offices had not been filled for an inordinately long period of time. To add to educators' worries, the media started circulating stories hinting that political affiliation was now a consideration in the appointment of county school superintendents. With these and other strange happenings cropping up, schoolmen, including Council members, began having the feeling akin to Cornwallis' after Yorktown, i.e., perhaps their world was turning upside down.

However, going on the offensive, the Council was not slow in striking back. Council President Alexander McBride, at the direction of the Executive Committee, sent then Commissioner Fred Burke a letter requesting clarification of the rumor concerning the involvement of politics in appointing county school superintendents. Commissioner Burke replied, outlining his selection process and denying the charges of politics by stating, "Although the Governor's office was apprised of the appointment of the new county superintendents, I was not directed to, nor did I make any changes in my selections of the individuals for these positions." This exchange of letters had one salutary outcome: it soothed the ruffled feelings somewhat.

Another example of how the Council was willing to take up the cudgels occurred when Thomas Robinson rose to his feet at a general meeting to propose two resolutions. This incident took place at the close of a stormy session following a presentation by an assistant commissioner who was substituting for the originally invited Commissioner of Education. Robinson's first resolution proposed that the vacancies in the State Board of Education be filled with reasonable dispatch, and the second called for the Commissioner to act upon the selection of county superintendents to fill vacant positions. Both resolutions were adopted by acclamation. As a significant addendum, Dr. Robinson suggested to the assistant commissioner that "... he inform the Commissioner of Education of the discussion's tenor." Thus, it became clear that the Council was moving into high gear. Newly elected Council President, Gerald Hopkins, echoed this thought when he reported to the Council's Executive Committee. Said Hopkins, "I am concerned about the state of education in New Jersey. Our Executive Committee must exercise its constitutional power and speak out on current issues."

The Council did make its views known to state education officials, the Legislature, the Governor, and to the media. The principal vehicle employed was the adoption of resolutions, most of which were introduced in the latter part of the 1970's. Included in those "whereas" and "be it resolved" missives were position statements on topics like Tuition Tax Credits, Shortfalls in State Funding, Appointment of a New Commissioner, and Alternate Routes to Certification. It is interesting to note that, in the latter instance, an initial resolution made by the Executive Committee favoring the Commissioner of Education's certification plan was subsequently disapproved by the entire Council's membership. At a plenary session, members' emotions were very close to the surface.

It was during the 1970's and early 1980's that solving problems by committee action was also widely used. At any given time, it was not unusual to have as many as three committees laboring concurrently. It should be emphasized these were often "working committees" whose major responsibility was to produce something tangible like, for example, a booklet on the Council's history or a position paper on teacher education and preparation. Prepared by Council members themselves, tasks like these took a considerable amount of time from their regular employment responsibilities. No professional, full-time staff members were available to either direct or share the burdens of these endeavors.

The preceding sentence poses a problem which the Council, in the coming critical years, might well consider. No one, of course, can safely predict precisely what the future holds for any organization. But if the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's are guides as to what the Council's future will be, coping with changes and challenges almost certainly will be included among its responsibilities. But how to best meet the emerging challenges? It is likely that writing and sending letters and drawing up and dispatching resolutions, despite the Council's prestigious reputation, will not be enough.

The challenge is large, but surely one that the Council can surmount. The energy, talent, and will that has made the Council a leader in New Jersey educational circles remains. The faces and names of members will change with time, but not the resolve to provide a strong, effective, and efficient educational system for all New Jersey students.