Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School

Education as if Citizenship Mattered

MICHAEL C. JOHANEK
JOHN L. PUCKETT

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Philadelphia

BARUCH COLLEGE LIBRARY
CHAPTER TWO

East Harlem in the 1930s: Constraints and Opportunities

A LIFELONG OBSERVER OF EAST HARLEM affairs, a consummate cultural pluralist and an ardent democrat, Leonard Covello possessed a profound tacit understanding of the area and its complex social forces. He brilliantly crafted an institutional mechanism, community-centered schooling, expressly to respond to these factors. As two of its major evolving goals, Benjamin Franklin High School aimed to advance cultural pluralism and intergroup harmony, and to mobilize East Harlem's splintered ethnic groups in cooperative efforts that would solve pressing social problems and extract a measure of social justice from an insouciant city.

This chapter explores the forces and conditions that shaped East Harlem from the 1890s, when Pietro Coviello’s family arrived in the district from southern Italy, to the 1930s, when Pietro’s son Leonardo and his Italian American allies organized politically to create a boys high school for East Harlem. By the 1920s Italians, overwhelmingly from southern Italy, had become East Harlem’s largest ethnic group; by 1930, according to a count by Covello, Italians prised about one-third of a total population of 233,400 in East Harlem. In no small way Covello’s plan for the new high school, both in its evolving conceptualization and in its operation in the years before World War II, grew out of the tensions that were inherent in the cultural experience of first- and second-generation Italian Americans.

Yet East Harlem was a culturally diverse terrain, and the experiences of other ethnic groups were also salient. Demographic change was an East Harlem constant in the first half of the twentieth century; ethnic groups were in motion and conflict, and the district was rife with intergroup hostilities that would emerge in and shape the community high school. Of these other ethnic groups, we give particular emphasis to the early growth of the Puerto Rican population because that group’s ascendency by the late 1940s would prompt a redirection of Benjamin Franklin’s curricular and community programs. We also consider institutions and agencies that were linked to particular ethnic groups, as well as ones that served a larger constituency, and we address to other aspects of social life that would elicit an institutional response from the community high school. An overview of East Harlem’s early development and immigrant history sets the stage for this discussion.

Early Growth and Development of an Immigrant Terminus

An area for farming and large estates well into the second half of the nineteenth century, East Harlem had become, as early as the 1830s, a “retreat for sportsmen and a haven of private estates and less a region given over to agriculture.” At midcentury East Harlem counted about 1,500 residents, with at least four hotels arrayed along the Park Avenue horse-car line, which extended north to the Harlem River. Brownstone houses, abodes of the wealthy, had begun to appear on Fifth Avenue, most prominently at 125th Street; concomitantly, Irish and German immigrants, refugees from the Lower East Side, were settling in crate-box shantytowns closer to the river. By the 1860s, the area’s remoteness had made it attractive first as a dumping site for city garbage, then as a slaughterhouse district. The worst section was the Harlem Flats, an East River marshland of tidal ponds and creeks east of Park Avenue between 98th and 113th streets, described by one observer as “a marsh in winter and an effluvia-emitting slough in summer,” its stench detectable as far as Central Park. This condition changed dramatically when extensions of the Second and Third Avenue railroads reached upper Manhattan in 1879 and 1880, respectively, connecting East Harlem by a forty-five-minute train ride to the business and industrial districts in lower Manhattan. Real estate developers reasoned that overcrowding in other areas of the city, particularly the Lower East Side, favored residential development in East Harlem. The availability of better housing and rapid transit meant that inner-city dwellers, even the working poor, could now reside in East Harlem and still work downtown. The landlords’ calculated risk paid off handsomely even though the decision-making process leading to a move uptown was far more varied and complex than they had imagined. In the early 1880s East Harlem experienced an unprecedented housing boom, especially in the Harlem Flats between Third Avenue and the East River above 100th Street, where low-cost four- and five-story tenements arose on landfill and the high ground of the flats. The stage was set for the arrival of thousands of southern Italian
immigrants and the creation of an uptown Little Italy east of Park Avenue between 104th and 119th streets.

The building boom of the 1880s included West Harlem, an area that was bounded by 110th Street on the south, 159th Street on the north, and Fifth to Eighth Avenue on the east-west axis. Irish and Germans of means, including many German Jews, fled the downtown ghettos and relocated in Harlem. Between 1895 and 1910 the Jewish population of Harlem grew steadily, its numbers augmented and then dominated by an influx of eastern European Jews moving up from the Lower East Side. In 1923 approximately 176,000 Jews resided in Harlem; 75,500 lived in West Harlem, 101,000 in East Harlem (roughly 47 percent of the population). Harlem was predominately Jewish, and East Harlem was the largest Jewish section.8

Yet by this time an out-migration of Jews had already started in West Harlem, at first involving only a small number of families leaving for new residential sections in the Bronx. Later it sharply escalated as blacks began to enter the Jewish neighborhoods. Between 1910 and 1915, blacks moved into the neighborhood around 135th Street and Seventh Avenue; by 1920 they comprised 83.7 and 73.9 percent of the population in health areas 10 and 13, respectively—the area between Fifth and Eighth avenues from 126th to 142nd Street. And they had arrived as far south and east as 114th Street between Lenox and Fifth avenues. By 1930, blacks dominated West Harlem north of 118th Street, and they were a growing presence in the blocks around 110th Street.9

Recession of the Jewish population followed a similar pattern in East Harlem, where a small out-migration to the Bronx turned into a large-scale retreat in the face of the arrival of blacks and Puerto Ricans. In the 1920s Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic groups entered the area between Madison and Seventh avenues from 102nd to 119th Street. Blacks and Puerto Ricans filtered into neighborhoods east of Fifth Avenue, and Italians, who were prevalent in the blocks east of Third Avenue, pushed west of that boundary. The largest press by blacks was in health area 16, the area between Third and Fifth avenues from 119th Street to the Harlem River—where they constituted 31.9 percent of the population. By 1930, writes Ronald Bayor, East Harlem's Jewish population had dwindled to just 2,800, a 97.1 percent reduction since 1923.10

Italian Harlem: Rise and Domination

Italian immigrants were present in East Harlem as early as 1875, recruited as strikebreakers on the First Avenue horse-car line. Their employment engendered a longstanding conflict with the Irish working class, which was intent on establishing an ethnic niche in the New York City construction trades. The vilified strikebreakers were housed in single-story shanties built along the Harlem Creek in the vicinity of First Avenue and 106th Street. Their arrival in the Harlem Flats set the stage for a much larger influx of Italians that would begin in the 1890s.11

By 1890, as a result of burgeoning immigration, New York's Italian population numbered 114,877 (foreign born and of foreign parentage), greater than a fivefold increase from 1880. In 1900 the Bureau of the Census counted 225,026 Italians in New York; less than four years later the total reached 382,775. The heaviest concentration of Italian settlement was the notorious Mulberry Bend area of lower Manhattan. "Mulberry Bend," George Pozzetta writes, "exhibited all of the worst characteristics of slum life. Cramped, overcrowded tenements, inadequate water and sanitation provisions, filth, squallor and crime were all in abundant example."12 Bursting at the seams, Mulberry Bend began to disgorge its overflow population in the late 1880s. In the next decade many Italians left lower Manhattan for East Harlem. New arrivals, including Pietro Coviello, began to bypass Mulberry Bend altogether, heading directly to East Harlem from Ellis Island on the First Avenue horse-car line or the electric streetcar lines along Second, Third, and Lexington avenues.13 By 1910 East Harlem's growing Italian population was concentrated along Second Avenue between 102nd and 116th streets, including the neighborhood around Thomas Jefferson Park at Pleasant Avenue. Increasingly thereafter, and most intensely after 1920, East Harlem's Italians were involved, directly and indirectly, in a pattern of neighborhood "invasion" and succession.14

Though the Italians were East Harlem's dominant ethnic group in the 1930s, their absolute numbers were declining. Two conditions explain the receding Italian presence. First, federal immigration laws after 1921, especially the Reed-Johnson Act in 1924, severely curtailed immigration. Second, scores of families, having accumulated sufficient savings, were leaving Italian Harlem's tenements in search of improved housing and social status in the Bronx and Queens. The Italians were not "ethnically displaced." Unlike the Jews, they were able to stave off the influx of other ethnic groups, in particular Puerto Ricans and African Americans, at least until after World War II. While Puerto Ricans were the dominant counterbalance to the Italian presence, they were unable to gain a foothold in the central zone of Italian settlement. A critical factor was the temporary halting of Puerto Rican migration in the 1930s and the return of many of the migrants to Puerto Rico. A large-scale recession of Italians was postponed until after the war, when Puerto Ricans arrived in East Harlem en masse and public housing projects, which proliferated in the district in the early 1950s, began to attract large numbers of poor blacks to the Italian section.15

By 1930 the Italians were heavily concentrated in health areas 21, 22, and 26 (roughly the blocks between 104th and 119th streets, from Third Avenue to the East River), where they comprised approximately 79.6, 78.6, and 84.3 percent of the population, respectively. (The main building and "street units" of the original Benjamin Franklin High School would be located in an Italian tenement
neighborhood on 108th Street, between First and Second avenues.) Italians interfaced with Puerto Ricans west of Lexington Avenue, and with Puerto Ricans, blacks, and Irish between 104th and 100th streets. Beyond these interstitial blocks the Italian presence dissipated.  

The distinction made by historian Caroline Golab between "neighborhood" and "community" is useful to this analysis. As Golab's description of ethnic Philadelphia is apropos of intergroup relations in East Harlem, we quote her at length:

The urban neighborhood, defined here as a physical or geographical entity with specific (subjective) boundaries, was always shared by two or more groups; or, to be more accurate, by three or four or more groups. Each group constituted its own community or network of social-emotional relationships. . . . Neighborhood and community were never synonymous. Diverse peoples shared the same city-space, but proximity did not lead them as a matter of course to interact with one another at the social or emotional level; rather, each group kept to its own network of affective structures. The distinction between neighborhood and community is critical, for it explains how neighborhoods could physically integrate diverse cultures and yet be "provincial" and "isolated" places. The provinciality and isolation of the immigrant resulted not from physical or spatial segregation but from the effectiveness of the many separate community networks, none of which needed or wanted to interact at the social or emotional level.17

Golab's categories are also descriptive of intragroup relations within East Harlem's zone of Italian settlement. Most East Harlem Italians traced their ancestry to southern Italy, where they or their parents had been rural peasants (contadini), or if they were extremely fortunate, artisans or small merchants; most Italian immigrants had experienced hardship in the old country—perhaps an exploitative landlord or the periodic droughts that made farming such a hazardous occupation in southern Italy. "The world the Italians entered in Harlem was recognizable to them," historian Robert Orsi has written. "It was a world of unemployment, overpopulation, disease, and exploitation."18

Southern Italian peasants were agrotown dwellers who toiled as day laborers, sharecroppers, or shepherds. Situated among agricultural lands, the paese, or agrotown, with as many as fifty thousand inhabitants, was typical of the Mediterranean region. Landless agricultural workers, the largest and lowest element of the agrotown population, often had to labor on distant estates—and at irregular intervals depending on the season—returning to their families only on weekends. In 1901, according to Leonard Covello, fewer than 10 percent of contadini owned their land, and even then, in most cases, this was subsistence farming. "The main and often only source of income of southern Italian peasants," he writes, "was their employment by large estates or wealthier land cultivators. In other words, the majority of southern peasants were hired help."19

Above the peasantry, which had its own status hierarchy, stood the artisan class. The distinction between artisan and peasant was largely one of status and relative degree of freedom, not of material wealth—both were "terribly poor" by northern European and U.S. standards. Artisans and small merchants, unlike the peasants, controlled their own labor and typically worked in shops below their dwellings.20 Literacy was another indicator of separation. Whatever books were to be found in the rural town belonged to the artisans, and most books had a religious content, primarily the lives of saints.21 Covello's family belonged to Avigliano's artisan class. Pietro Covello was originally a shoemaker by trade, as was his brother Domenico Canio, a master at his craft and the senior male of the family. The child Leonard attended a primary school in Avigliano, where he learned basic literacy skills—the mark of an artisan's son. Indeed a few books were to be found in the Covello home, among them Giuseppe Mazzini's Duties of Man.22

Another factor distinguishing the two classes was the political activism of the artisans, who participated both in the Italian wars of liberation and the political unification of Italy after the Risorgimento. In the post-Risorgimento era, the artisans formed political clubs that challenged the power of the absentee estate holders, who composed the third, and dominant, social class in southern Italy. By contrast, the contadini had no political organizations. And when they voted, they sided with the landlords, upon whom they were economically dependent.23 Covello's political activism was kindled by the rich traditions of his artisan family in Avigliano. "My uncles, cousins, and other relatives related stories about Mazzini and Garibaldi and particularly about the brigands who infested the region of Lucania, stories told around the fireplace with just the light from the burning logs," he recounted in his autobiography. "Children listened to their elders. We rarely ventured even a question and never offered a comment, for that was the way to absorb knowledge and wisdom."24 In a sense Covello's struggles to galvanize a spirit of social activism in Italian Harlem involved a conflict of artisan and peasant values, the latter broadly entrenched. The problem, however, ran deeper than political apathy, for a deeply rooted devotion to the family group and the gemeinschaft network of paezani (townsmen) worked against larger communal values in East Harlem and an interest in societal affairs.

The southern Italian family (la famiglia) was an extended clan that embraced blood relatives and aunts, uncles; and cousins. Loyalty to the nuclear and extended family took precedence over social responsibility. Family honor, a source of kinship solidarity and clan feuds, had a prior claim over any claim the state or local community might presume to make.25 Italian
Americans of the immigrant generation observed the "traditional patterns of respect [rispetto], familial obligations, and social behavior" of their native southern Italy—and they attempted to recreate that moral world and pass it to their children.26

As Miriam Cohen observes, southern Italy was a patriarchy whose private reality often belied its public rhetoric. Recent feminist scholarship such as Cohen's challenges the "conventional wisdom of patriarchal southern Italian culture," demonstrating that "married women played very active roles within the family and took part in important decisions about the behavior of its members." Cohen argues that while "southern Italian society was very much a patriarchy in the legal sense—males acted as official representatives of the family to the public world"—the private reality of family life presented a less hierarchical relationship of men and women than their public status and roles might suggest. The southern Italian wife and mother had not only a powerful domestic and moral influence, but also a decisive voice, at least equal to her husband's, in such important practical matters as the family budget, daily purchases, and dowry and inheritance planning. In many cases contadini women worked outside the home to support the family, either laboring in the fields at harvest time or selling produce and wares in the marketplace. When southern Italian men migrated—some on a seasonal basis and many others, like Pietro Coviello, remaining abroad for years—women assumed full responsibility for managing their households, combining economic projects with domestic tasks.27

Giving impetus to the migration of many thousands of contadini at the turn of the century was a congeries of push factors, among them the predictable chronic hardships of life in the Mezzogiorno; an unjust system of taxation imposed by agents of the national government who colluded with southern landlords; crises in the South's grain and wine markets; and a chain of natural disasters (for example, an earthquake and tidal wave in the Strait of Messina that killed as many as a hundred thousand people in the city of Messina).28 There were strong pull factors as well, not the least of which was the prospect of economic opportunities in the United States.29

The first large wave of Italian immigration to the United States took place between 1890 and 1910; for most of these years, males accounted for about 80 percent of the total. As Thomas Kessner observes: "The Italian immigration was, by and large, a nonfamily movement of males in their productive years. These single men came to make some money and go home."30 The small minority who decided to stay, however, formed "a critical mass upon which an increasing proportion of the later arrivals could rely to help find work and residence."31 Pietro Coviello was part of this chain migration led by males, and his actions typified the dominant process involved in settling an Italian family permanently in the United States. After his arrival in East Harlem in 1890, Pietro took up residence as a boarder with the Accurso family. Vito Accurso, the head of the household, was a fellow townsman (paesano) from Avigliano, and he may have been a relative of Pietro's. Boarding of male paesani and relatives was a characteristic feature of the chain migration process. Once sufficient resources were accrued, the rest of the family could be brought over from Italy. Chain migration etched a pattern of residential clustering—Italian immigrants settled among their kin and paesani in New York and elsewhere.32

Notwithstanding the harsh conditions many of these immigrants were fleeing, they left their homelands with heavy hearts. The pain of separation was assuaged to some extent by the continuities the immigrants experienced "between the moral world of southern Italy and the emerging moral world of East Harlem."33 Writing in 1935, Edward Corsi ruefully recalled the severe depression his mother experienced after the family's arrival in East Harlem in 1907: "She loved quiet, and hated noise and confusion. Here she never left the house unless she had to. She spent her days, and the waking hours of the nights, sitting at that one outside window staring up at the little patch of sky above the tenements. She was never happy here and, though she tried, could not adjust herself to the poverty and despair in which we had to live."34

Corsi's mother eventually returned to Italy, where she died of causes related to her depression. Her malady seems not to have been atypical. Covello's mother, like Corsi's, apparently wasted away in the throes of a long bout of severe depression. He recalled that "she had settled into a permanent land of languor which slowly ate away the very life of her." As his wife lay dying, Covello's father lamented, "For what? Leave home. Come to a strange land. All the suffering. To what purpose? For an end like this?"35

Sociologist Robert Freeman's analysis of the 1900 federal manuscript census for four enumeration districts in East Harlem shows that Italians constituted 78 percent of the population in the blocks between 110th and 114th streets, roughly from Second Avenue to the East River. (Jews predominated in the area from 99th to 104th Street between First and Third avenues.) In 1910 the total Italian population of East Harlem was just over fifty-nine thousand, and the Second Avenue-East River corridor was 96 percent Italian. Between 1910 and 1920, the Italians consolidated their hold on the blocks east of Third Avenue. In the 1920s, concomitant with the departure of Jews and Irish, they were solidly entrenched from 104th to 119th Street east of Third Avenue. They were also moving west of Third Avenue along the same north-south corridor, and by the time Benjamin Franklin High School opened, they were the dominant national group in the area east of Park Avenue.36

Most Harlem Italians of the first three decades of the twentieth century fit the description of what demographers now call the "working poor." Freeman's analysis of the 1900 federal manuscript census for two enumeration districts in East Harlem shows that 54 percent of adult Italian males worked as day laborers, which for most reprimed their occupational status in southern Italy. Approximately 70 percent of the Italian men were employed on the lower rungs of the construction trades, working as unskilled and semi-skilled
laborers—many East Harlem Italians helped build New York City's elevated subway lines. By 1910 their employment had become more diversified, with 28 percent involved in construction and most of the remainder working in factories (typically piano manufacturing), street trades, and small proprietorships (barbershops, shoe-repair shops, grocery stores, and the like). A not uncommon trajectory for Italian male self-employment led from pushcart peddler to garden produce concessionaire to grocery store owner.37

Similarly, Miriam Cohen's analysis of a 5 percent sample of the 1905 New York State manuscript census for three Italian neighborhoods in New York City, including a neighborhood in the heart of Italian Harlem, shows that approximately 44 percent of married Italian males in the three sampled neighborhoods were unskilled laborers (street cleaners, dockworkers, and construction laborers). About a quarter of the Italian husbands were skilled workers (barbers, tailors, and skilled construction workers); the remainder included semi-skilled laborers, shopkeepers and industrials, and white-collar workers. Cohen's sample analysis of the 1925 state census for these same neighborhoods shows that most Italian husbands had a low earning capacity, and their families were poor. Unskilled laborers represented 48 percent of the 1925 sample, and the percentages for the other occupational categories were about the same as 1905.38

The dire financial straits of most Italian families, whose fathers earned an average of $519 annually, necessitated the employment of women, who "flocked to work." Of Italian women sixteen years and older, 45.5 percent were gainfully employed, twice as many as the national average for all working women. The garment industry was the major source of employment for these women—in factories, shops, and home piecework arrangements, the latter involving about 25 percent of all Italian apartments. Italian women made up 36 percent of the entire workforce in this industry, and they dominated the occupational force in the artificial-flower and feather industries. Married women routinely cared for boarders, in addition to being occupied with domestic responsibilities and home piecework or other employment. As reported in a 1920 survey of Italian women in the Mulberry Street district's Little Italy, about 50 percent of fourteen- to twenty-year-olds, and 29 percent of twenty-one- to forty-four-year-olds, had jobs.39

Employment data collected from two large samples of Italian males are suggestive of the economic background of the Italian boys who entered Benjamin Franklin High School in the fall of 1934. In 1925 the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau enumerated the occupational trends of 31,556 and 16,945 New York City Italian males as recorded on marriage, birth, and death certificates in 1916 and 1931, respectively. According to John D'Alesandre, the author of the report, "the data concerning marriages in 1916 and births in 1916 may well be taken as typical of the parents of children now in our High Schools—ages 14 to 18." For each category of certificates Casa Italiana tabulated the thirty-six leading occupations of Italian males in 1916 and 1931. Significantly the occupation "laborer," the largest grouping for both years, showed a decrease from 50.4 percent in 1916 to 31.4 percent in 1931. Diversification of Italian male employment was shown to be a continuing trend. Of the top fifteen occupations listed in each of the three certificate categories in 1916 and 1931, tailors, barbers, shoemakers, carpenters, and painters appeared in the list; four new occupations—chauffeur, clerk, salesman, baker—appeared in the top fifteen in all three categories in 1931. Notwithstanding some employment gains for New York's Italian males by 1930, they remained preponderantly blue-collar workers, and their families always struggled to make ends meet.40

To cite a rough index of family prosperity, Italian families paid a median rent of $32.59 in 1930, the second-lowest rent reported among twenty-eight ethnic groups in the city. As Cohen observes, even skilled workers, subject to the vagaries of seasonal employment, were prone to low incomes; "many jobs such as bricklaying, stonemasonry, and carpentry were particularly vulnerable to dips in the market and changes in the weather."41 Sociologist Roger Waldinger describes the Italians as a "proletarian population" who "found themselves clustered in industries and occupations where they were bossed and directed by others"; often these "others" were Irish or Jewish.42 Averting the hard living experienced by the overwhelming majority of their coethnics, a small coterie of Italian American professionals, including Covello and Marquantonio, resided in the so-called doctors and lawyers row, "a lovely stretch of limestone houses" on 116th Street between First and Pleasant avenues; given their immigrant backgrounds, however, none of them were strangers to poverty and hardship.43

The Great Depression took a heavy toll on Italian Americans. Ronald Bayor, who reviewed the Casa Italiana data, notes that "nearly half of the Italian-born fathers in 1931 were in occupations which were severely affected by the Depression," especially laborers in the construction industry.44 According to a 1932 Mulberry Street survey, 48 percent of the Italian families lacked a full-time adult wage earner. As regular work in increasingly short supply, married women turned to homework to keep their families afloat. "Indeed," according to Miriam Cohen, "during the height of the Depression, while the number of factory jobs shrank, the more poorly paid, irregular forms of employment—in particular, homework in the garment and artificial flower industries—rose dramatically."45

Economic hardship was associated with low levels of schooling among southern Italian immigrants. The contadino family regarded education as the prerogative of the home (domus), where training was informal and involved the transmission of family mores, traditional patterns, and work skills. In southern Italy formal education was restricted to elementary schooling and, in most cases, pursued only by the children of the artisan class.46 While structural factors militated against formal education in the South—for example, lack of government support, nonenforcement of Italy's compulsory education law, lack of...
school facilities—entrenched cultural attitudes and practices also had harmful effects. The latter factors carried over to New York.47

Southern Italian children were expected to contribute to the family economy, a cultural expectation that collided with the American high school.48

"While the contadino parents became, outwardly at least, adjusted to elementary education for their children, latent antagonism remained," Covello observed. "They delayed their plans for financial assistance from their children until their children might legally work. An antagonistic attitude toward high school education then developed with much the same intensity as the earlier antagonism toward the elementary school. The rejection of high school education is based upon old-world concepts of higher education, as well as upon economic factors. The Italian parent in America can see no moral or economic value in an expansion of the schooling period beyond the elementary school level. Contrarily, he considers the high school a place where time is spent in play or idleness."49

Cohen views school rejection in a somewhat different light, weighting her analysis toward the economic and social forces that impinged on New York's Italian American families. While Cohen acknowledges the "carryover of traditions," she suggests that familial attitudes toward schooling, in particular the high school, were also influenced by the conditions Italian immigrant families encountered in New York. For example, although the infant mortality rate was unacceptably high for Italians in East Harlem, that rate was not nearly as high as they had experienced in southern Italy. While health-service reformers in the 1920s succeeded in reducing infant mortality, their efforts were not matched by a reduction in the fertility rate. Accustomed to high mortality in their past experience, Italian immigrants continued to produce large families in New York, which stretched their resources and compelled them to put their children to work. "In short," Cohen writes, "the economic and demographic pressures encouraged parents to view their offspring as workers rather than school children."50

The educational levels of New York City's Italians lagged behind those of other groups, especially the Jewish population, whose traditional culture accorded learning "an honorable place" and a "special role."51 In 1940, for example, 82 percent of adult second-generation New York Italians, as opposed to 33 percent of second-generation Jews in the city, had acquired only an eighth-grade education or below; whereas 20 percent of the Jews had some college or more, only 6 percent of the Italians had a comparable level of education.52 In the 1930s second-generation Russian Jews in growing numbers achieved white-collar status through the apparel industry, public-sector employment, and the teaching profession. These jobs were staging grounds for the spectacular rise of Jews in the professions and higher education in the decades following World War II; anti-Semitism in the city's labor markets slowed but did not thwart this ascendancy. Higher education in municipal institutions became a Jewish trademark in the 1930s; all-male City College of New York, all-female Hunter College, and coeducational Brooklyn College were preponderantly Jewish institutions by 1940. By contrast, "schooling levels among native-born Italians were relatively slow to rise."53

From the southern Italian immigrant's point of view, the school, more than any other U.S. institution, jeopardized the integrity of the family and the core values of via vecchia (the old way). Robert Orsi's Italian American informants recalled the centrality of the domus in their lives and culture growing up in East Harlem. He writes: "A well-raised child, then, a young member of the community who was ben educato, was not one who had successfully completed the course of American schooling, for example, but one who had been successfully taught the values of the domus."54 "A jarring note in the harmony of the family was struck when the child began to go to school," Covello declares. "It was at this moment that the parents felt the impact of an alien culture upon the child and very directly upon themselves. At this moment they clearly sensed the conflict between themselves and the American school. They became aware of the peril to their familial tradition and realized that the school implants into the child a different tradition; so different that there were only a few points of coincidence."55

Covello, who had a wealth of interview and life-history data at his disposal, found that the second generation's acculturation to U.S. mores was a topsy-turvy process that began with the child's temporary rejection of familial culture at the elementary age level.56 One of Covello's informants recounted his experience of this process:

Many of my Italian friends would say, "They have lived their own lives in their own way. We want to live our lives in our own way and not be tied down to fantastic customs that appear ridiculous not only to us but particularly to our 'American' friends." And I can assure you we were particularly keen about that ridicule. In fact so much so that we never invited our "American" friends to our home. And while "American" boys took their parents to some of the school functions, we not only did not take our parents but never even told them we were taking place. That was our life—exclusively ours and that of the other boys. The deadline [sic] was the threshold of the door of the house or the tenement in which we lived. Beyond that the older folks went their way and we went ours.57

The high school years, however, were marked by a "gravitation toward parental patterns" and the mores of via vecchia. "In high school there was a different atmosphere," the same informant recalled. "Somehow there was little that would make us ashamed of our origin. Probably the reason was that we began to distinguish between Jews, Irish, Germans, and so on. The Italian boys kept
together in high school and felt at ease when in company with each other; we dared even to oppose an Irish clique that tried to make fun of us." Covello noted "a high degree of retention by the [high school age] Italian children of the parental tradition." One of these mores, which affected even third-generation Italian Americans, was the belief that education was primarily a family matter. It was, in Covello's judgment, the primary factor underlying the chronic truancy of many Italian American youths—a factor he believed was strongly correlated with the "comparatively high delinquency rates" of this group. "At least truancy, so far as seems to be evident in the high school, is not caused by a lack of parental control. . . . Truancy is the product of rather strict adherence of the Italian youth to the patterns of family life which eo ipso is detrimental to school attendance." Community norms in Italian Harlem tolerated teenagers "hanging around" at candy stores or other locales during school hours. Covello found that parent and child often colluded to violate the school law, especially when the family's interests were served by having the child at home. This is not to suggest, however, that the domus was free of conflict between immigrant parents and their adolescent children. That was certainly not the case. As Orsi notes: "Often the two generations did not even speak the same language to each other: the immigrants might speak to their children in dialect and be answered in English, because their offspring could understand but not speak the tongue of the paese." Intergenerational conflicts erupted over values and behaviors, no matter how trivial, that the parents believed threatened the primacy of the domus. Italian American young people, particularly the young men, sought a respite from domus pressures in what Orsi calls "a geography of rebellion"—parks, subways, elevated trains, buses, and social clubs—where young people held romantic assignations, young men joined gangs, and young women bobbed their hair. In most cases these "gestures of rebellion" were temporary, for "the most profound bond between the individual and the domus, . . . the link that frustrated all efforts to escape, was the fact that the men and women of Italian Harlem had deeply internalized the values and perceptions of the domus. They could not free themselves, however much they may have wanted to, because they bore the domus within."

The Great Depression marked a turning point in the educational patterns of Italian American children. Structural changes in the economy prompted higher levels of high school attendance. In the mid-1930s New York State outlawed factory piecework in the home, established new restrictions on child labor, and passed a new compulsory-school law that required most children to remain in school, and out of the economy, until age sixteen. The disappearing youth labor market, indeed the paucity of regular employment for the ethnic working class, forced legions of older adolescents into the city high schools; they had nowhere else to go, as John Tildsley of the city's High School Division grudgingly acknowledged.

Following the Depression, Italian daughters, more than their brothers, had a strong economic incentive to continue their education. Reduced fertility rates, a by-product of hard times, freed them from many of their earlier domestic burdens. Increasingly a bustling market for female clerical and retail workers in New York attracted Italian women to enroll in commercial and business courses in the high schools. By 1950 these second-generation women, this time with the blessing of la famiglia, had outdistanced their male peers in high school attendance and were entering the white-collar ranks en masse. The majority of second-generation males continued to hold blue-collar jobs into the 1950s. In the second-generation fourteen- to twenty-four age cohort, 39 percent of females versus 34 percent of males had completed four years of high school or more.

In the early years of Italian settlement in East Harlem, as we previously noted, immigrants from the same towns and provinces tended to cluster together. In the case of Covello's family and their paesani, "the idea of family and clan was carried from Avigliano in southern Italy to East Harlem. From the River to First Avenue, 112th Street was the Aviglianese Colony in New York City." The spirit of regionalism, or campanilismo, made East Harlem a segmented community. Orsi has written that "extreme regional consciousness began to fade in the 1920s and 1930s, only to be replaced by an equally extreme neighborhood focus. Campanilismo was translated into a more American, urban, idiom as intense neighborhood loyalties developed. Little communities formed within Italian Harlem, each with its own traditions and sources of authority and maintenance. Strictly defined borders marked out the neighborhoods within Italian Harlem, and people tended to keep to their own blocks, choosing friends and spouses only from the immediate vicinity."

As Orsi suggests, East Harlem's youth culture reflected these neighborhood divisions. Neighborhood-based gangs proliferated, and as sociologist Frederic M. Thrasher's East Harlem researchers discovered, juvenile delinquency was not stemmed by the Jefferson Park Boys' Club, which served six thousand youngsters. One of Orsi's informants told him: "You could do two things when we were kids—you either became a thief and eventually go to the rackets or you could go to school." Covello believed that a community-centered high school in East Harlem would help ensure the latter option. In Italian Harlem this endeavor would confront a culturally defined skepticism of secondary schooling and, as historian Simone Cinotto argues, an Italian "family ideology" that was wary of involvement in public affairs. By 1930 a centralizing force and important source of Italian American identity was the popular devotion to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel (la Madonna del Carmine), an annual feast day (festa) that started July 16 and lasted as long as a week. The Church of Our Lady dominated the four hundred block of East 115th Street, less than a half block from the Pleasant Avenue site at which the new Benjamin Franklin High School would open in 1942. The festa reflected
the prominent role of saint and Madonna worship in southern Italian and Italian American Catholicism. As Joseph Varacalli observes: "The worship and reliance on saints were part of a matrix of folk religiosity that fused with Catholic elements components of magic, superstitions, the occult, and paganism." Saint worship provided a psychological buffer that helped assuage the vicissitudes and travails of peasant life in the Mezzogiorno. Southern Italians had a veritable directory of saints, each invested as a specialist in a particular category of miracles, each with his or her feast day on the calendar. Closely related to and sharing many similarities with saint worship was the adoration of the Madonna, who assumed many manifestations and locally ascribed characteristics in southern Italy. More often than not the patron saint of a town or village was the Madonna. In 1882 a mutual aid society composed of immigrants from the town of Polla, in the province of Salerno, organized a feast day in East Harlem to honor Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the protectress of Polla. What started as a simple outdoor celebration in a tiny courtyard on 110th Street near the East River would, as more and more Italians arrived in East Harlem, grow into a great annual religious festival for all Italian Harlem.

In 1884 the New York Archdiocese brought the fledgling lay celebration under ecclesiastical supervision, granting official sponsorship of the festivities to the Pallotines order. That same year the church on 115th Street was completed, standing a few blocks north of the Italian neighborhood. From 1884 to 1919, Irish and Germans controlled the upper church; the Italians were treated as an "annex congregation," their worship restricted to a chapel in the church basement. From the outset the city's Irish-Catholic hierarchy was ambivalent toward southern Italian folk religion, which the church regarded as "the Italian problem," fearing that it would retard the assimilation of Italians, yet also recognizing that the Italians would abandon the church if it prohibited the festivities. Consequently, the prelates adopted a policy that treated the Madonna of 115th Street and similar popular devotions elsewhere as a transitional stage toward full participation in American Catholicism. The separation of the devotion to the Madonna del Carmine from its original identification with a particular province of Italy had the long-term effect of contributing toward an Italian American identity. And it was a step toward overcoming East Harlem's fragmented community life. Put another way, the devotion was an example of "cultural construction for purposes of ethnic community building."

Before the turn of the century, the church acquired a luminous statue of la Madonna, which reposed in the basement chapel, the site of Italian worship. From 1920 to 1922, shortly after the Italians had moved their worship to the main sanctuary, the church interior was renovated through generous donations from the entire Italian Harlem community. In 1923, the statue of la Madonna was transferred upstairs and enthroned on the main altar. A bell tower was constructed in 1927, again through community donations, its chimes first tolling on Christmas Day. Like the festa, the campanile contributed to building an Italian American identity, as both a symbol of collective effort and a celebration of Italian heritage. "With the campanile, the church—and the neighborhood—looked more Italian," Orsi has written. "The street in front of the church now had the feel of an Italian village square." (Fifteen years later the new Benjamin Franklin High School building would stand within a half block of the church, a secular beacon within the spiritual heart of Italian Harlem.)

East Harlem's festa had a "dense" street life, expressed on the occasion of an extravagant parade that was the highlight of the week. "The great Mount Carmel parade," Orsi remarks, "with thousands of marchers, trailing incense and the haunting sounds of southern Italian religious chanting, made its way up and down every block in the 'Italian quarter' of Harlem." Regional social clubs were represented, as were Italian Harlem's youth gangs. Thousands of the devout watched the parade from crowded windows. Servicing the procession were myriad vendors, among them local merchants whose sidewalk booths were filled with wax replicas of internal human organs and with models of human limbs and heads. Someone who had been healed—or hoped to be healed—by the Madonna of headaches or arthritis would carry wax models of the afflicted limbs or head, painted to make them look realistic, in the big procession. The devout could also buy little wax statues of infants. Charms to ward off the evil eye, such as little horns to wear around the neck and little red hunchbacks, were sold alongside the holy cards, statues of Jesus, Mary, and the saints, and the wax body parts. While such practices mortified the Irish toward southern Italian folk religion, which the church regarded as "the Italian American foll~'ay;" it evoked for its participants a warm memory of the old country.77

As we suggested, the devotional to the Madonna did not literally replicate an old-world folkway; it was a transmuted cultural practice, to which new elements were added in East Harlem. The festa was an amalgam that grew to represent the feast-day celebrations of all the particular villages of southern Italy. In effect, the Madonna of Polla became the patroness of Italian Harlem. Other innovations crept into the festivities, such as the pinning of money, U.S. dollars, to the Madonna's effigy. Katherine Conzen and her colleagues write: "Inevitably, the campanileistic basis of the celebration became diluted, elements from the new-world setting were incorporated, and it became over time itself an expression of an emerging Italian American identity." As Orsi puts it, the feast of Mount Carmel expressed "a nascent community consciousness. . . . It was a central communal event that mobilized the energies of all Italian Harlem and absorbed manifold conflicts and identities into a shared task."

In the 1930s the East Harlem festa was still waxing strongly, although Italian membership in the Mount Carmel parish was waning—from about 6,800 in 1910 to between three and four thousand by the Great Depression. "The
reason for this [decline],” a researcher for the Boys’ Club Study observed, “is that as soon as the people have money enough they move to the Bronx, to Queens, to Long Island.” Yet the Italian American out-migrants and their children returned to the Madonna of 115th Street year after year, and the festa bands continued to play in East Harlem.

The Catholic Church was not the only faith vying for Italian souls in East Harlem. In the 1890s the Protestant churches of New York began missionary efforts among the Italian immigrants and their children. These churches combined evangelism and philanthropy to win converts; the Protestant clergy used the social settlement as a proselytizing strategy, a tactic that incorporated both approaches.8 The evangelical fervor of the Methodist missionary Anna Ruddy, director of the Home Garden settlement in Italian Harlem, will be described further in Chapter 3. Her proselytizing efforts converted Leonard Covello, whose family was nominally Catholic, to the Methodist faith. Beginning with Ruddy’s tutelage, Methodism and the settlement house movement exercised a formative influence on young Covello, strengthening the service commitment imbued by the artisan traditions of his childhood in southern Italy. Deeply religious, Covello later (the precise year is not available; it was after the death of his first wife in 1914) joined the Jefferson Park Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1895. The church’s cream-colored brick facade at 407 East 114th Street faced, and still faces, Jefferson Park, less than a block west of Pleasant Avenue and the site of the future high school. Covello and Vito Marcantonio assisted at Casa del Popolo, at 319 East 118th Street, which became the social service arm of the church in 1920.83

As we have seen, Italian Harlem in the 1930s was an established and evolving ethnic community. Italian American culture and identity were wellsprings on which Covello and his staff would draw in building their community high school. Embedded within this ethnic culture, however, were factors that would challenge this project, notably distrust of the U.S. school and a disinclination to participate in the public sphere. Italian American ethnicity also threatened to jeopardize areawide community building in East Harlem, where a growing Puerto Rican presence became a casus belli for a generation of Italian American youth.

**Puerto Ricans in East Harlem: The Early Settlement**

In the early decades following the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898, structural changes in the island's economy gave impetus to a migration of Puerto Rican workers to the mainland and New York City. Landholdings in the island's coffee sector, formerly the island's mainstay crop, were increasingly consolidated into “a mechanized, technologically advanced plantation system” that was dominated by four U.S. sugar corporations. Chronic unemployment, related primarily to the ascendency of “mechanized capital intensive sugar production” that “displaced more workers than it incorporated into the system,” and secondarily to changes in the tobacco industry, started gradually before World War I and accelerated throughout the 1920s.84 When Bernardo Vega, a cigar maker *(tabacquero)* from the Puerto Rican highlands, arrived in New York in 1916, a small colony of about fifty Puerto Rican families lived alongside poor Jews in the vicinity of Park Avenue between 110th and 117th streets. At that time Jews and Puerto Ricans shared Park Avenue’s open-air market *(marqueta).* Vega also observed that Puerto Ricans were interspersed in the blocks along Third Avenue between 64th and 106th streets; others resided downtown in Chelsea and a wealthy few had located on the Upper West Side.85 According to Lawrence Chenaught, the first large settlement of Puerto Ricans was in the vicinity of 101st and 102nd streets at Third Avenue, which was a poor tenement neighborhood.86

In 1926, an estimated 20,000 Puerto Ricans resided in the area bounded by 90th and 116th streets, First to Fifth Avenue; a total of some 40,000 had settled in upper Manhattan.87 In 1930, according to Chenault, the line of Puerto Rican settlement extended “from about 97th Street up to and along 110th Street around the northern part of Central Park, northward to about 125th Street, and approximately from about Third Avenue on the east, to Eighth and Manhattan Avenues on the west.”88 The largest concentration appears to have been in health area 20, the neighborhoods around 115th and 116th streets west of Third Avenue.89

The Puerto Rican influx may have been the last straw for East Harlem’s Jews, whose recession was completed by the end of the decade.90 By the 1930s a new ethnic skirmish line had formed along the Park Avenue corridor, and the massive viaduct of the New Haven and New York Central Railroad, which ran between 96th and 111th streets (with openings at each cross street), became a contested boundary and visible symbol of this conflict; the occasional clashes that erupted along this border between Puerto Rican and Italian youth gangs would have harmful spillover effects on Benjamin Franklin High School.91

Most first-generation Puerto Ricans in New York had chosen to leave a badly deteriorating island economy for a mainland urban economy with relatively higher weekly wages. In the 1920s Puerto Rican migrants found jobs primarily in the garment trades and light industry, hotel and restaurant trades, cigar making, domestic service, and laundries. (According to one estimate, 60 percent of New York’s working Puerto Ricans in the 1920s were employed in the tobacco industry.) Entry into these labor markets was eased by immigration restriction, which reduced competition for unskilled and semiskilled jobs that paid on average about twenty-one dollars per week.92 Employment of New York Puerto Ricans remained overwhelmingly blue collar throughout the 1930s. As reported for 1930–36, of 1,997 jobs obtained
by Puerto Rican males under the auspices of the Puerto Rican Department of Labor's employment office in East Harlem, only about 8 percent were white collar; of 3,641 jobs reported for females, none of the positions were white collar.93 The Depression forced about ten thousand Puerto Rican migrants to return to Puerto Rico. Virginia Sánchez Korrol writes: "Those Puerto Ricans who remained in New York, fortunate enough to be gainfully employed remained concentrated in the unskilled, semiskilled, blue-collar areas working at jobs basically similar to those held by immigrant groups during the past decade. But whereas during the twenties migrants were filling positions previously slated for newly arrived European immigrants, the decade of the Depression found Puerto Ricans competing with unemployed individuals for jobs as dishwashers, counterwomen, laundry workers, or in maintenance."94

Within their East Harlem zone of settlement, the Puerto Rican migrants established a cultural life of great vitality and sociality. In the 1920s and 1930s East Harlem's El Barrio (also la colonia hispana), the city's largest Puerto Rican colony, was New York's "mecca for Latin entertainment, shopping or professional services"—a status that greatly chagrined the Brooklyn colony's leaders, who suffered the indignity of watching boatloads of their compatriots dock in Brooklyn only to leave post haste for Manhattan. A small coterie of Puerto Rican professionals (physicians, dentists, lawyers), merchants, and restaurateurs stood at the apex of this vibrant scene.95 Korrol argues that previous researchers, including Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, overlooked the rich associational life and communal organizational activity that flourished on the edges of El Barrio's bustling street life. For example, at least forty-three Hispanic organizations were active in New York by the mid-1920s, including "hometown or regional clubs; groups pledged to support island or continental political persuasions; Latin cultural societies or civically oriented associations."96 Not surprisingly, these organizations provided leadership for the Spanish-speaking community. For example, the Porto Rican Brotherhood of America, founded in 1923, figured prominently in community affairs, striving "to be the type of group which could defend the Puerto Ricans within the political structure of New York City while maintaining links with Puerto Rico and acting as a watchdog in issues involving the United States and Spanish America." Indeed in the aftermath of what the New York Times called the "Harlem Riots" of July 1926, primarily a conflict between Jews and Puerto Ricans, the Porto Rican Brotherhood lobbied local police to increase their patrols in the affected neighborhoods; organized a media campaign with La Prensa, the city's major Spanish-speaking newspaper, to help ease tensions; and called on Mayor Jimmy Walker, Governor Al Smith, and federal officials to restore order and protection in the area.97

The Puerto Rican migrants brought with them a tradition of labor organizing and involvement in radical politics. Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón, both socialist writers, described the tabaquero custom of le lectura as it was enacted in New York's Spanish-speaking cigar factories. A lector designated by the workers read aloud daily, one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon, to the cigar makers while they plied their craft; the morning session included news and current events, the afternoon session politics and literature. "And let me tell you," Vega proclaimed, "I never knew a single tabaquero who fell asleep."98

Notwithstanding a high level of cultural and communal identity, organizational activity, and social networking, daily life in El Barrio was "a struggle to survive on meager wages, inadequate health care, sub-standard housing, marginal educational and poor sanitation conditions" (conditions that afflicted all of East Harlem's groups, as we will see).99 Nowhere was the plight of the migrants more poignantly evident than in the treatment Puerto Rican children received in the public schools of New York City. Not only were these youngsters routinely placed one or two years behind their mainland peers, but also they were labeled retarded or slow learners, both conditions reflecting the incapacity of the city schools to deal with "monolingual Spanish-speaking students." Consequently, many Puerto Rican youths failed to complete their secondary schooling.100

Italians, Puerto Ricans, and East Harlem's other ethnic groups, including "Negroes," Irish, Germans, British, Russian Jews, Finns, "Scandinavians," and "Slavs" (among the categories listed by the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau), were subject to similar deprivations in employment, housing, health and sanitation, schooling, public safety, and recreation. As a major immigrant terminus, East Harlem was a disempowered, highly stressed district where dire social conditions only worsened as the Depression deepened.

General Social Conditions: Hard Living and Malign Neglect

The Great Depression's effect on East Harlem may be likened to an earthquake sundering a rickety frame house. According to a report of the East Harlem Nursing and Health Service, by December 1931, 45 percent of East Harlem's male labor force was out of work, and 55 percent of heads of families were unemployed. Such were the hard times that men who worked as little as two to three days per week were listed as regularly employed.101 East Harlem's poverty and tradition of hard living were longstanding and deeply entrenched; they could not be easily purged. The area remained a low-rent residential district for the working poor, with 229 of the district's 271 blocks devoted predominantly to housing. Of East Harlem's labor force of approximately seventy-five thousand, an estimated sixty-one thousand had to seek work outside the district; East Harlem produced only 14,700 jobs, according to the Mayor's Committee on City Planning. Business and industry serving the city as a whole...
largely bypassed the district; the seven north-south avenues mostly carried traffic, with only a small proportion of the vehicles arriving or embarking within the district. East Harlem was, the Mayor's Committee on Planning ruefully noted in 1937, "a local backwater with a dead-end psychology; a place from which to watch the swift stream of the city's life go rushing by." Most of the district's commercial activity—and the major source of local jobs—was quartered in storefronts on the ground floor of tenement buildings, typically small-scale businesses serving particular neighborhoods, or "ethnic villages," and contributing to the isolationist cast of the district.102 By the mid-thirties, the district counted five hundred candy stores, 685 groceries, 378 restaurants, 156 bars, and 230 tailor shops, "a lot of small business in a good year."103

Notwithstanding East Harlem's multitudinous problems, city planners at the height of the Depression were optimistic that the district might, through a combination of progressive forces, break out of its historic isolation and ignominious status. They saw the looming presence of the Triborough Bridge, with a terminus in East Harlem at 125th Street and connections into Queens and the Bronx, as a propitious sign for future investment and commercial exchanges involving East Harlem across the metropolitan area; they saw New Deal housing legislation as a particularly ripe opportunity for a thoroughgoing refurbishing of the district's residential properties and "a new renaissance . . . of really good medium and low rent apartments."104 By any measure, however, East Harlem was a far cry from realizing that felicitous vision when Benjamin Franklin High School opened in 1934.

Long before the Depression, acute poverty and hard times were endemic in East Harlem, perhaps an ineluctable consequence of the district's historic role as a conduit for the assimilation of low-status immigrant and migrant groups. In combination, overcrowding and a badly deteriorated housing stock were arguably the most deleterious manifestations of hard living in the district, given that they exacerbated other social conditions. Most East Harlem residents lived in "old law" tenement flats of two to five rooms, with no direct sunlight in at least two of those rooms; these flats were maintained in buildings that were long overdue for major reconstruction or replacement.105 "A tenement built to accommodate sixteen families, houses over thirty," complained Angelo Patri, a contemporaneous observer. "The rooms are small, damp, dark, and sunless. The plumbing is bad, the ventilation abominable, the odors unbearable."106

The term "tenement," associated with housing for the urban poor, was in common usage in New York City by 1865. Since 1811 the city had subdivided its blocks into 25-by-100-foot lots; rising to five or six stories, the early tenements, called "railroad flats," often consumed about 90 percent of these lots, in the absence of any minimum standards for space, light, or ventilation. The Tenement House Law of 1867 provided a few minimal standards such as mandatory fire escapes and at least one water closet for every twenty tenants. Yet, as housing reformers Lawrence Veiller and Hugh Bonner noted in their report to the New York State Tenement House Commission in 1900, architects frequently ignored the clause of the 1867 legislation that required fire escapes, perhaps because such appurtenances offended their artistic sensibilities. A revised act of 1879 restricted tenement house space to no more than 65 percent of the standard lot and added more toilets. Difficulties in enforcing the 1879 law eventually led to a compromise that was acceptable to residents—the "dumbbell" or "old law" tenement, which covered 80 percent of the standard lot, with four dwellings per floor surrounding a common water closet and stairwell. By 1900, about 2.3 million people, two-thirds of the city's population, were housed in more than eighty thousand tenements, three-fourths of which were of old-law construction built after 1860. Old-law development was synonymous with overcrowding—one dumbbell tenement block had a density of more than two thousand persons per acre. In 1900 pressure from the Charity Organization Society in New York City led to the appointment of a new tenement house commission headed by Robert DeForest and Lawrence Veiller. Their work resulted in the Tenement House Act of 1901, which legislated "new law" standards for tenements, restricting coverage to 70 percent, expanding the size of the dumbbell air shaft to courtyard proportions, and providing running water and a water closet for each dwelling and an exterior window for each room.107

In 1902 New York City established a tenement house department to ensure compliance with the new law. Good intentions, however, went awry from the start, as tenement housing reform failed to realize its promise of social amelioration. The "new law" apartments, some 117,000 in New York City by 1910, were priced beyond the means of the lowest-income families; the upshot was a high vacancy rate and doubling up of families in single apartments. Not that new-law housing marked any significant advance over its old-law predecessor; the dumbbell tenement—as historian Anthony Jackson puts it: "The improvements in lighting, ventilation, sanitary facilities, and fire prevention still left much to be desired." According to a tenement house department report of the 1930s, new-law buildings established in the trail of the 1901 reform act had "considerably deteriorated." Aggravating the problem was an unsavory combination of corrupt municipal officials, unscrupulous and incompetent builders, and negligent landlords.108

East Harlem residents of means took advantage of expanding subway lines and moved to the Bronx, Astoria, and other outlying areas. Yet the filtering process by which habitable old-law buildings would pass down to lower-income groups largely did not occur. Many sweatshops replaced the larger housing units, as few of the existing residents, particularly in the Depression period, could afford the rent of these larger units—by December 1931 the number of "totally unemployed men" represented 45 percent of the male labor force in East Harlem, an increase of 100 percent in one year.109 Consequently as the
Depression deepened, more and more East Harlemites were pressed into overcrowded living arrangements. A researcher for the Boys' Club study in 1932 wrote: "On one 'social block,' two facing sides of one street, for the distance of one block, there are three thousand individuals, and no tenement in this block is over four stories high."110

In 1934 East Harlem had a population of about 201,000 people that was compressed into 947 acres, a density of 212 persons per acre. The continuing out-migration of families, including nine thousand Italians since 1930, coupled with immigration restriction, contributed to the declining population base and a 21.5 percent vacancy rate in East Harlem's tenements. Approximately 90 percent of the district's rental housing was priced in the "low or lower medium rent" group, that is, less than thirty dollars per month; by contrast, less than 4 percent was priced above sixty dollars per month. In its 1937 survey of East Harlem, the Mayor's Committee on City Planning commented tersely: "Most of the buildings have seen their day," and the committee recommended large-scale demolition between Third and First avenues.111

Housing conditions exacerbated problems of health and sanitation. A student researcher in 1936 gave the following report of "very lamentable and very unhealthy" conditions in the five and six "walk-up" tenement buildings: "Bath tubs are more of an exception than a rule; in many cases toilets are located in the hall-way or on the corridor of each floor. The tenants on each floor keep a key to such places where sanitary measures are very much needed. Radiators are almost unknown as the houses are not supplied with steam heat equipment. The old system of the coal stove is still predominant."112 Similarly, a student essayist wrote: 'When Johnnie, a typical East Harlem boy, wants to go to the toilet, he must use one that is in the middle of the whole floor. It is placed there for the use of the entire floor, which has seven families on it. He waits sometimes for one-half hour. Besides this it is filthy, unsanitary, and a place one doesn't like to use.'113

A Union Settlement informant related a story of comparatively better living conditions in another tenement building:

My recollections of East Harlem date back to 1923. We lived at 451 East 115th Street, across from Holy Rosary Church. [I remember] the cold water flat in which we lived—four families on each floor and each two families shared a hallway closet. We had a bathtub for "Saturday Nite" baths that was located in our kitchen. The tub was covered by a tin enamel plate. We had gas but no electricity—the gas was not billed monthly—if you wanted gas, you fed the meter 25 cents for 20 minutes. For bright lights we depended on a very delicate gas mantle. If a fly hit the mantle, that was the end of the bright light. Our food was all purchased from pushcarts and stores on 1st Avenue from 100th to 116th Street. No Supermarkets! If you wanted milk and the store was closed, the storekeeper had a panel in the door that you could push in, and use his milk scoop to fill your pot and leave 6 cents for every quart you took.114

Sanitation, even in the district's best sections, was always problematic. A Boys' Club Study researcher, an East Harlem native, wrote that the district's streets, teeming with pushcarts, were "quite filthy with garbage and waste."115 East Harlem's riverfront was dilapidated and noxious, a canker sore of urban blight.116

Infectious and communicable diseases were legion and deadly. From 1916 to 1925 East Harlem's general mortality rate stood at 15.3 per thousand, versus 14.7 for New York City; pneumonia was the leading cause of death in East Harlem, with heart disease, pulmonary tuberculosis, and diarrhea/enteritis ranked second, third, and fourth respectively.117 In 1930 the East Harlem District had the city's highest rates for typhoid fever, measles, scarlet fever, diphtheria, whooping cough, influenza, and pneumonia—and it had the third-highest mortality rate for tuberculosis; the Mayor's Committee on City Planning reported in 1937 "above average death rates" for influenza, pneumonia, and tuberculosis in East Harlem.118 From 1916 to 1920, the infant mortality rate stood at an appalling 100.6 per thousand live births, versus 94.3 for Manhattan and 88.2 for the city as a whole. On a positive note, following an intensive campaign by the East Harlem Health Center, the rate for 1920-25 was reduced by more than 23 percent to 76.7 per thousand live births; for 1925-30, infant mortality declined further to 71 per thousand.119 This downward trend continued in the 1930s, especially after 1934, when La Guardia began to increase public funding for the city's health district programs. For example, Health Districts 21 and 22, in the heart of Italian Harlem, showed declines in infant mortality from 60 and 57 per thousand in 1931-35, respectively, to 55 and 42 per thousand in 1936-40, respectively.120

Growing up in East Harlem was risky business. For example, the high volume of vehicular traffic posed an enormous safety problem, given that East Harlem's children habitually used the streets as playgrounds. Mapped in 1811 for horse-drawn vehicles, the city's avenues were, by the mid-1920s, in the grip of "strangling traffic congestion," a half-million cars daily. In 1926 an estimated 859,600 daily commuters traveled the north-south arteries from the Bronx or Upper Manhattan to areas below Fifty-ninth Street.121

According to a New York University researcher, "hordes of [children] are seen after school hours and on holidays playing ball, craps, and cards. They become expert in dodging traffic and are oblivious to the casual passer-by for play engrosses their entire attention for the time being." In 1927 cars and trucks killed fifteen of these children, primarily on Second and Third avenues.122 The abysmal lack of playground space on public school property was a key indicator of the recreation crisis; according to the Mayor's Committee on
City Planning, "the sixteen public schools of East Harlem, taken together have only sufficient play space [5 acres] for one modern school of normal size." East Harlem had nineteen play streets, a makeshift solution that created a noisy and hazardous ambience for the residents whose flats fronted the designated blocks. Even more unsatisfactorily, along Park Avenue from 121st to 124th Street the city jury-rigged play spaces dangerously abutting these cross-streets as they passed under elevated the railroad.

Public parks were also scarce. The only general-use park located completely within East Harlem was Thomas Jefferson Park, which stood near the East River and after 1942 adjoined the southern boundary of the new Benjamin Franklin High School building at 114th Street and Pleasant Avenue. The Department of Parks officially opened the park in October 1905 "with a chorus and mass flag and dumbbell drills by thousands of neighborhood children." In the 1930s, the WPA constructed an enormous swimming pool in Jefferson Park—a resource that would be hotly contested by East Harlem youth gangs in the 1940s, with serious ramifications for the community high school.

Organizing East Harlem: An Infrastructure

In its 1937 report, The East Harlem Community Study, the Mayor's Committee on City Planning focused primarily on the district's deficits, highlighting, for example, the egregious absence of a public hospital and the need for "at least one truly modern high school." Leonard Covello, who served on the sponsoring committee for the study, had a heavy hand in determining the agenda for the final report. A consummate pragmatist, Covello recognized the manifest and latent strengths that were represented in the twenty-six pages of the report that adumbrated the myriad social services and resources available in East Harlem. No matter how sparse, these assets and the organizing infrastructure that supported them provided the community building blocks for Benjamin Franklin High School.

East Harlem enjoyed a rich and varied tradition of social welfare activity and community organizing. For example, no fewer than 110 mutual benefit societies provided recreational and religious activities, death benefits, and occasionally sickness and accident benefits to the Italian community. At least forty-three political, cultural, and civic organizations served the Spanish-speaking populations of New York City, and of East Harlem in particular. As many as fourteen social settlements and multiservice organizations were active in the district in 1930. Three of these organizations were closely linked to Covello and Benjamin Franklin: Union Settlement, Haarlem House, and the Heckscher Foundation.

Founded in 1895 by graduates of Union Theological Seminary, Union Settlement at 237 East 104th Street provided, among other services, a playground and gymnasium, a health clinic, a music school, social clubs for children and adults, and a program for the aged. Haarlem House developed out of the Home Garden, the Methodist mission founded by Anna Ruddy, who had...
inspired Covello's commitment to a life of dedicated Protestant stewardship. Incorporated in 1901, the Home Garden, after two moves, found a permanent home in 1917 at 311–313 East 116th Street, where in 1919 it was incorporated as Haarlem House. (In 1957 Haarlem House was rededicated at the same site as La Guardia Memorial House.) This settlement offered educational and recreational services and served as a valuable training ground for Italian American leaders, among them Vito Marcantonio, the future congressman from East Harlem, and Edward Corsi, who served in various government posts, including commissioner of immigration in the Hoover administration.

The Heckscher Foundation at 104th Street and Fifth Avenue, founded in 1921 by the German-born industrialist August Heckscher, served as a recreational center that boasted a marble pool on the sunlit top floor and one of the finest gymnasiums in the city. Located on the western edge of East Harlem and serving both boys and girls up to age sixteen, the foundation also provided free dental clinics, dance classes, music lessons, vocational guidance, an employment bureau, and emergency relief, as well as a camp program outside Peekskill, New York.

The East Harlem Health Center at 160 East 115th Street, one of Covello's closest allies and an influential voice on the high school's community advisory committee, pioneered innovative community health programs, services, and materials that were adopted in other cities. The health center regularly sponsored public health campaigns, and its affiliated agency, the East Harlem Nursing and Health Service, at 454 East 122nd Street, provided districtwide prenatal and well-baby care. Sophie Rabinoff, director of the health center and cochair of Benjamin Franklin's health committee, led the high school's East Harlem health and hospital campaigns (see Chapter 6).

Serving as an umbrella group for twenty-seven local agencies, the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies coordinated various neighborhood efforts in social work, health care, recreation, and education. Chaired by Grace Anderson of the East Harlem Nursing and Health Service, the council provided a loose network that proved critical in mobilizing support for the establishment of a high school in the area. Selina Weigel, for example, a representative of the East Harlem Health Center and a member of the council's executive committee, did recruitment work and served as secretary to two key committees on the high school campaign. The council sent a resolution to the board of education calling for the establishment of the high school.

An infrastructure strength that worked to Covello's advantage was East Harlem's tradition of political associations, clubs, and parties, which provided a broad political education to their constituents. At one time a center of Socialist Party strength, East Harlem, and especially the Italian section, lacked an entrenched Tammany machine and resisted loyalty to any single political party. Thus, while the Democratic and Republican parties figured prominently in local politics, third-party and fusion politics also played a role. Third parties rose and fell in the 1930s: American Labor Party, Progressive Party, Progressive Labor Party, Wet Party, Liberal Party, All People's Party, City Fusion, and Communist Party. Of fourteen political clubs in East Harlem, the club of Fiorello La Guardia, which Vito Marcantonio, Covello's former student and La Guardia's protégé, inherited, dominated the district's political life. From the mid-1930s to the late 1940s, Marcantonio developed a political machine that paid meticulous attention to local residents' concerns; it was a fine-tuned, compassionate variation of a padrone system that appealed to Italian and Puerto Rican voters alike. While the "God of the Churches" might stay in "celestial splendor far above the earth," proclaimed a former minister of the East Harlem Protestant Parish, "the God of this life is Vito Marcantonio and his kingdom is the American Labor Party. Obviously, the God who can get the plumbing fixed becomes the center of faith for the great majority." This is not to suggest that East Harlem residents did not participate in church or synagogue life. In May 1932, May Case Marsh documented thirty-three religious institutions within a 180-block area of East Harlem, roughly one for every five-and-a-half blocks. Largely divided along ethnic lines, the churches appeared to cooperate minimally with other community agencies and even less with each other, concerned primarily with an individualistic gospel and the internal conditions of their institutions. The Italian-dominated churches were particularly reluctant to embrace other national and racial groups.

In its informal organization, East Harlem was also a place busy with the local markets, quotidian distractions, and petty amusements of a crowded urban neighborhood. With good reason youth workers and school officials cast a jaundiced eye at the allurements. Five hundred candy stores dotted the area, serving as hangouts for youth while selling sweets, the latest news, and school supplies—and housing the occasional bootleg operation. Boys' Club Study researchers observed that "these stores are meeting places for suggestive children who are contaminated by the undesirable crowd which usually hangs out there." Shoe-repair shops and "shoe shine parlors" were also adolescent hangouts. A drink could be had on almost every corner, with at least 160 speakeasies flaunting the Eighteenth Amendment. There were also sixteen motion-picture theaters, five vaudeville halls, and fifty public pool halls, not to mention numerous private billiard operations in the district's fifty social and athletic clubs. Junkyards, some two dozen of them, held an allure as venues for danger and adventure. Covello could not have been pleased with the ambience of vice and temptation that beckoned his students at the very doorstep of Benjamin Franklin's main building on East 108th Street. Within a four-block area that included the fledgling high school, from 107th to 109th Street between First and Third avenues, Frederic Thrasher's social-base maps for the Boys' Club Study show one movie theater (the Verona Theater, standing catty-corner to the main building), three pool halls, five speakeasies, three saloons, and nineteen candy stores.
To summarize, East Harlem in its full panoply of social forces and contexts encompassed a vast array of educational influences. Some of these influences constituted or reflected major social problems; others carried a strong positive valence for educational purposes. After 1934 community-centered schooling would evolve as a formal educational strategy to help East Harlem's diverse citizenries surmount their cultural differences, mobilize collectively to overcome the negative social forces that impinged so forcefully on their lives, and achieve a more democratic, cosmopolitan community. Coeval with this evolving vision, Covello, his teachers, and community allies would harness East Harlem's social problems, as well as its trove of cultural and organizational resources, to the curricular and extracurricular programs of the new high school. Covello's background and preparation for this effort forms the core of the next chapter.

The Depression Era called forth powerful social forces that galvanized a small but hardy band of progressive educators to keep the reformist vision of community-centered schooling alive in the 1930s and early 1940s. Working in disparate locales and circumstances, their projects often unbeknownst to one another, these reformers built community schools and educational programs designed to improve the quality of local community life. The common ground of their diverse projects was the prevalent poverty and unemployment within their respective localities and their shared belief in the primacy of neighborly, face-to-face relationships, the efficacy of community problem-focused learning, and the potential of community-centered schools as integrative centers and catalysts for constructive social change.

The largest and most important community school experiment was Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem. More than any other community school, Franklin had an explicit agenda of democratic community development. It would strive to create a leadership class for East Harlem and to build and extend social networks and norms of trust and reciprocity among East Harlem's dozens of ethnic groups. The making of this high school was inextricably linked to the life and career of Leonard Covello, Franklin's founding principal, a native son of both Italy and East Harlem. In this chapter we examine particular elements of Covello's biography from his early life to midcareer that shaped his understanding and vision of community-centered schooling and led to the realization of the community school idea in East Harlem. Coming of age as a first-generation Italian American, Covello encountered, in highly formative ways, full-throttle assimilation for Anglo conformity in the youth-serving institutions.
FROM 1931 TO 1934, Leonard Covello was deeply involved in the successful campaign to acquire a boys' high school for East Harlem. The Boys' Club Study, which revealed the complexities of East Harlem's social problems, suggested the need for a collaborative, multi-institutional approach. Envisioning community-centered schooling as the catalyst for such a strategy, Covello and his staff, between 1934 and 1942, organized the key structures and programs that marked Benjamin Franklin High School as a community school. These components provided frameworks and mechanisms for coordinating the positive educational forces in East Harlem toward Covello's goal of democratic community development. More precisely, Covello and his associates organized a community advisory council and its subcommittees, a set of street units (social clubs and research bureaus), and WPA-sponsored recreational and adult programs to build and strengthen social networks in East Harlem, supporting and complementing Franklin's school-day academic programs and civic education activities.

The outreach components developed at Benjamin Franklin's main building on East 108th Street and on the surrounding block were not simply Covello's invention (see Figure 4.1). Such activities as recreational programs, social clubs, and formal adult education were introduced in the city schools at the turn of the century, often through the medium of social settlements. And as we saw in Chapter 1, by 1918 community programs operated at scores of schools under a citywide director of community centers. These centers were expanded in the 1920s and 1930s, reporting aggregated attendance rates as high as eight million a year after 1935.
While Benjamin Franklin's community program was not distinguishable in kind from earlier "wider use" efforts; the program's comprehensiveness, theoretical sophistication, reliance on social research, and integration of underlying community issues with the school curriculum made it markedly different in degree.2 Much more than recreating the school as a recreation or community-service center, Covello conceived of Benjamin Franklin as an agent of cultural democracy, situating the school centrally in the tradition of citizen-centered community schooling. The Benjamin Franklin example reveals the challenges of pursuing citizen-centered schooling within an academically rigorous, subject-centered education. And it discloses the tensions that arise from the extraordinary demands community-centered schooling puts on teachers, tensions that may be grounded in conflicting notions of teacher professionalism.

Creating Benjamin Franklin High School

By the early 1930s the threads of Covello's experience had begun to weave the complex tapestry that became Benjamin Franklin High School. "What was in the back of my mind," he remembered, "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."3

In the 1930s progressive intellectual ferment and social analysis fostered a climate of opinion that fortified activist educators like Covello who wanted to achieve social justice and a reasonable quality of life for all Americans, albeit without social upheaval. In New York City, where rampant unemployment propelled unprecedented numbers of youths into the high schools, Covello and his allies would receive a favorable hearing for a social innovation that had lost its constituency after World War I.

"THE WORLD IS ON FIRE, and the youth of the world must be equipped to combat the conflagration," Teachers College's Harold Rugg argued to the World Conference on the Educational Fellowship in 1932.4 The same year his colleague George Counts stunned an annual Progressive Education Association convention with his clarion call for social reconstruction through the schools.5 Historian Charles Beard, a frequent speaker to educational groups, warned school leaders of the "crisis in American thought" that lay behind the distress of the Depression.6 Embedded within an increasingly strained, disturbed, and often displaced Depression-era populace, "the range of permiss-
ble socioeconomic dissent probably widened in the schools,” cracking open the
door to what Herbert Kliebard has called the brief “heyday of social meliorism.”7 The “brute fact of the depression,” claimed an Ohio superintendent, had
shocked Americans into reconsidering their “free-for-all race for special privilege” and “lip service to democracy.” The economic crisis, this school official
insisted, forced Americans to rethink the foundations of their world, for “in
the matter of arousing the public mind, the end of our national joyride was the
beginning of our national schooling.”8

In the thirties U.S. high schools experienced an unprecedented surge in
enrollments, from about 4.8 million in 1930 to more than 7 million in 1939.
As the youth labor market collapsed in the Depression, more and more youths of working-class and poor backgrounds turned to the high school as an alternative
to the breadline. They were hardly welcome. School leaders across the country
recalled at this onslaught of young people who were deemed unfit for the
high school. Yet leading educators and professional organizations were clamoring
for curriculum reforms to accommodate this army of presumed incapables.9

By the end of the 1930s, roughly 73 percent of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds were attending high school, up from just over half at the start of the
Depression.10 Increasingly they came from Italian, Jewish, Slavic, and other
immigrant backgrounds. High school educators struggled to “Americanize”
these “new” students and address the challenges of what many referred to as
“the second-generation problem.”11 Confident in the science of education’s
capacity to identify and address distinct mental abilities, educators also sought
to adjust the high school curriculum to the perceived talents and destinies of children with different backgrounds.12 In what Paula Fass refers to as “a new
common-school era,” the arrival in high schools of so many immigrant children
changed the face of secondary education in the large cities and “replaced the
pious air of Protestant respectability with a complex cosmopolitanism.”13

As more youth entered high school and stayed longer, the schools were
called upon to play a greater role in what Teachers College professor Paul
Hanna called “our youth problem.”14 With severe unemployment and more
employers demanding more years of schooling, high schools also took on a custodial function, keeping youth out of labor markets and off the streets.15 The
concern grew that adults in already fragmenting urban communities, under the
extreme strain of the Depression, would be unable to nurture or even to control their youth properly. Many observers perceived a rising juvenile delinquency, especially among urban boys, and sought the high school’s help in combating this threat. The specter of troubled youth loomed large.16 The
Depression seemed to target youth selectively, pushing their unemployment
up to approximately 50 percent; some three million youth of high school age
never worked nor attended school.17 Hanna, therefore, worried that “with no
sense of belonging to a great enterprise which demands their loyalties and
their labors, with no responsibility for making a contribution to the larger
group, the young develop few of those character traits which are so essential
and basic in a highly interdependent modern society.”18

Harvard criminologist Eleanor Glueck spoke more specifically of a disintegrating society’s disastrous impact on the young, increasing “the restlessness
of ‘modern youth’ in this age of ‘jazz’ and ‘petting parties.’”19 In a time of Fascist and Communist youth movements abroad, the possible radicalization of
youth worried more than a few observers. As youth left schools only to find no
jobs, lamented New York University sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh, more and
more ended up in prisons or flophouses. Hundreds of thousands of others had
decided to take to the road, “‘thumbing’ their way or ‘riding the rods,’ ‘burning’
their living, sleeping in transient camps or in ‘jungles,’ keeping alive, but
many of them trying to forget there was a tomorrow. Others sat at home, idle
and brooding—insecurity and despair eating at their hearts like a rust.”20

Nowhere were these issues more pressing than in New York City, which
boasted the world’s largest school system. To serve the enormous diversity of
its school-age population—including, since the turn of the century, millions
of newly arrived immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, a human tide
that flowed unabated until the 1920s—the city built a variety of special schools
alongside the regular elementary, junior, and senior high schools. The high
schools were especially varied. By the 1930s, as Ruth Markowitz notes, “there
were high schools for academically, musically, and artistically gifted students.
There were numerous technical high schools, including one for the aviation
trade, one for students pursing jobs in the textile industry, and even one for
future homemakers.”21

Between World War I and the mid-1920s, New York’s high school enrollments
more than doubled, from 61,000 to 125,000. What began as a surge in
the twenties became a stampede in the thirties: by 1931, as the Depression
depenened, citywide enrollments in the regular day high schools reached
178,000, an increase of 22 percent from 1925–26. By 1934, enrollments had
increased another 54,000, or 30 percent. For the ten years before the 1934
opening of Benjamin Franklin, the largest proportionate increases occurred in
the Bronx (290 percent), Queens (251 percent), and Richmond (221 percent);
Brooklyn reported an increase of 110 percent; Manhattan, which had the
largest average daily enrollments for the period, showed a 33 percent
increase.22 City enrollments steadily increased, albeit at a slower rate after
1934, until a pre–World War II high of 256,000 was reached in 1938–39 in the
regular day high schools. Vocational high school enrollments, which had shown
modest gains from approximately 4,000 students in 1925–26 to 8,000 in
1934–35, soared for the next six years, from 30,000 in 1935–36 to 56,000 in
1941–42.23 Throughout the decade overcrowding in all these institutions was
endemic—even the annexes were bulging.

The palpable symbol of the need for a high school for boys in East Harlem
was overcrowding in DeWitt Clinton High School, which in 1929 moved from
59th Street and Tenth Avenue to Mosholu Parkway and Paul Avenue, in the North Bronx. In February 1931 Clinton recorded a total enrollment of 9,329 boys, with 6,164 located in the new main building and 3,165 in five annexes scattered across Manhattan. The largest annex, formerly PS. 172, was located in East Harlem at 108th Street between First and Second avenues; it would be the first home of Benjamin Franklin High School. More than a thousand DeWitt Clinton students were listed at residences in the Yorkville-East Harlem area, east of Fifth Avenue from 59th to 110th streets; approximately 10 percent of the high school's total registration was Italian American. The crisis at DeWitt Clinton sparked an organizing campaign to create a boys' high school in East Harlem—a campaign that Covello led and for which he helped effect a high level of grassroots organizing, building on his earlier successful campaign to establish parity for Italian-language studies in the city's high schools.

The nature of the East Harlem high school campaign, 1931-34, and its success reflected a community maturing in its organizational development and political clout. In particular the establishment of Benjamin Franklin reflected the growing political power of New York City's Italians, a change of leadership and direction within the board of education, and the growing ability of the school's advocates to take advantage of and to learn from changes in New York City politics. Covello would later recall that "a group of social-minded leaders in East Harlem" had been promoting an East Harlem high school for at least a decade prior to March 1931, when a committee of residents composed of educators and professionals met to draft a letter of appeal to public officials. Thus began an intensive three-and-a-half-year organizing and lobbying campaign, the fate of which was in the end determined by the outcome of the 1933 mayoral election. Only after La Guardia became mayor, drawing his greatest percentage of support from East Harlem, did the long effort to create Benjamin Franklin finally come to fruition.

The leadership core of the East Harlem high school committee included Covello and three other noted Italian American educators: Angelo Patri, principal of P.S. 45; Anthony Pugliese, district superintendent; and Mario Cosenza, dean of Brooklyn College. The group they led wrote letters, circulated petitions, called public meetings, held conferences with school officials, and passed resolutions from local organizations to the board of education. The new research from New York University's three-year Boys' Club Study provided ample data on local social conditions and needs. That study "was a potent factor in our argument," Covello noted, "as it provided data to prove that by working closely with students through the school, developing leadership, recreational programs, social awareness, we might be able to counteract disintegrating forces at work on the streets and even in the homes." The high school committee considered the rundown DeWitt Clinton annex in East Harlem an unsatisfactory long-term accommodation for the increasing number of Italian American youths who desired a high school credential. The committee advocated a "first class High School" for East Harlem—one that would diversify and make easily accessible curriculum programs tailored to the career interests of these students. Moreover, the committee wanted a "Community High School which the Community would feel was its own school—to which the parents could come easily and naturally."

Citing the absence of a senior high school that was easily accessible to boys who lived on Manhattan's Upper East Side or in the lower Bronx, the committee noted that no high school for boys existed on the East Side north of Fifteenth Street or south of 166th Street in the Bronx. "Many of the pupils in this Community," the East Harlem committee claimed, "because of lack of facilities, stop their education, or go to schools where they study the subjects that are taught but not necessarily the subjects they need or want." The upshot was increased juvenile delinquency. Unable to find work, these boys "turn to the street for recreation and activity which is often of an undesirable nature." In a letter to Associate Superintendent Harold Campbell, Covello argued forcefully that "I can positively state that the beginnings of many a criminal could have been turned in the right direction if they had been kept in school doing work in which their interests were satisfied." Covello and his allies envisaged "a high school that would take care of the boy that would want to go into the business life, the boy that had interests in the industrial field and the boy who would want to go into any of the professions—" in brief, a General or Cosmopolitan High School, that would give industrial, commercial and cultural training. Only by such an offering would it meet the needs of the Community and be a school for all children of all the people" (original emphasis).

A long-term goal of the new high school, as viewed by the East Harlem activists, was to aid in the overall development of the district. The school would "coordinate and extend the limited facilities now available for the greater benefit of the children and the community." It would work with existing social agencies such as Harlem House, the Heckscher Foundation, the Jefferson Park Boys' Club, and Union Settlement, which were already engaged in "extra curricular educational work with boys of high school age." Beyond its benefits to local youth, the school would serve to bring all the members of a diverse community together. "The establishment of such a high school in this district," claimed the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies, "would aid in unifying and organizing a community social spirit and improving its civic life." The discussion given to the high school's expanded role in the community reflected the dramatic growth and heightened profile of that institution in New York City. Owing to the "greater holding power of the schools" and reinforced by a lack of options during the Depression, day high school enrollment jumped nearly eighteen thousand students in a single year, from March 1932 to March 1933. Thus, the campaign for a boys' high school in East Harlem coincided with a general citywide need to address overcrowded high school facilities, if not also a need to reassess the role of secondary education. In many ways, it
was a moment “propitious for radical innovations” in New York City schooling. The Depression compelled a reevaluation of old assumptions about the role of public institutions, including public schools. Many educators “speculated ... about a boldly transformed social order ... [and] were willing to listen to different voices and entertain prospects of change that had been unthinkable in the profession only a few years before.” The need to build new high schools meant at least the chance that some new ideas for schooling might be realized. Recent New Deal funding had begun to provide resources outside the normal bureaucratic channels, allowing a new flexibility for experimentation. Finally, a state report published in 1933, while hailing many of the achievements of the city schools, recommended dramatic improvements, including a vastly increased guidance program and greater attention to “adapting curriculum programs to the individual needs of the children.” In addition, “teaching ability ... should be evaluated not in academic terms but in [students’] growth in personality, character, social responsibility and those other characteristics which are essential to the desirable citizen.”

The East Harlem high school committee worked vigorously to enlist prominent Italian American political leaders in the campaign. Congressman Fiorello La Guardia, Vito Marcantonio, New York State Supreme Court Judge Salvatore A. Cotillo, and Judge John Freschi of the General Sessions Court all lent their support to the effort. Covello solicited Cotillo’s support from the start, and La Guardia headed up a visit to Dr. Harold Campbell, then acting director of the High School Division, in the fall of 1931. Local agencies and foundations were soon brought into the campaign. A. Warren Smith, superintendent of the Jefferson Park Boys’ Club in East Harlem, and his board of trustees had pledged support to the campaign as early as May of 1931. In the spring of 1932 Miriam Sanders of Harlem House arranged to have Covello present the case for the high school to the influential East Harlem Council of Social Agencies, which endorsed and publicized the campaign. Selina Weigel of the East Harlem Health Center served as secretary of the committee and played a critical liaison role in marshaling local agency support. Public meetings further galvanized local sentiment for the school.

The campaign revealed the committee’s adaptability in the changing political climate of New York City. For example, Covello and his allies especially targeted Generoso Pope, an Italian with significant political and economic influence, to speak directly to the president of the board of education, Dr. George Ryan. Pope, publisher of the largest-circulation Italian daily, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, was known as the “sand king”; he owned the largest construction-material company in the world, the Colonial Sand and Stone Company, and was a benefactor to various Italian American organizations. Covello began cultivating Pope’s support for the high school in October of 1931 and provided him letters and materials to facilitate his lobbying of board president Ryan and Dr. Howard Campbell, now associate superintendent in charge of high schools. Pope’s assistance apparently helped convince the board to appropriate funds in 1933 for the establishment of the high school, and to provide for an additional principal position in 1933 for the 1934 budget. Campbell indicated that a word from Pope to Ryan and Mayor O’Brien would cement the deal. Apparently Pope wrote Ryan but never spoke to him personally, and Ryan may have simply passed along Pope’s letter. By July 1933 the campaign had stalled; a frustrated Covello wrote Cosenza that “it is a shame that we cannot put this thing over, especially as it is in our grasp. As a race, with exceptions, we do not seem to be able to strike opportunely.”

La Guardia’s election as mayor in November of 1933 brought the school within closer grasp. “The possibility of establishing a cosmopolitan high school in East Harlem at this time is very good,” declared Covello a month later. Adjusting to the new political situation, the high school committee apparently eased their lobbying of Pope, whose pro-Tammany Democrat *Il Progresso* had not supported La Guardia in his earlier bid for mayor, and quickly sought out the mayor-elect’s sponsorship. La Guardia had lobbied Campbell for the school two years earlier, and La Guardia’s election meant that a number of the committee’s allies would gain power. Marcantonio, who would win La Guardia’s congressional seat in 1934, was a key supporter of the new high school.

Key personnel changes at the board of education following La Guardia’s election favored the success of the campaign. Harold G. Campbell, a favorite of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), was appointed superintendent of schools in January 1934, “a key landmark in the triumph of progressivism.” Characterized as a “conservative in education,” Campbell nevertheless led the “labyrinthine city school system ... hurtling along the road mapped out for it by the PEA.” Fortuitously, Covello’s former principal at DeWitt Clinton, Dr. John Tildsley, was appointed acting head of the High School Division. Meeting with Tildsley to discuss the proposal, Covello and the representatives of East Harlem social agencies emphasized three points. First, the school would be “a community high school: a social center designed to serve the families living in its vicinity.” Second, the school would open in an existing building, and the high school committee would “keep on from that beginning until a new building was procured.” Third, the school’s attendance zone would be drawn so as “to avoid a large influx of Negroes from the Central Harlem District.” This last, controversial point warrants an explanation.

The East Harlem delegation was afraid that the Italians would not tolerate a large African American presence at the new high school. It would be unfair and unconscionable to impute any ulterior motive to Covello or his East Harlem allies in this matter—as we show in subsequent chapters, they were deeply committed to social justice. On the other hand, their strategy may have played unwittingly into a larger pattern of restricted access for blacks to upper Manhattan high schools. By the early 1930s some Manhattan high schools, especially Julia Richmond, were overcrowded, and Harlem blacks applying
there were funneled into “the unzoned, older buildings of Wadleigh and Haaren (as well as the various vocational annexes).” Wadleigh, located in Harlem, became a segregated high school. School Superintendent Harold Campbell “was sure that the zoning was not racial in origin, pointing to the permission given to some black students to cross zone lines as proof of a nondiscriminatory policy.” Harlem parents, the NAACP, and the New York [State] Temporary Commission on the Condition of the Colored Population thought otherwise; to their minds the segregation was “obvious.” Historian David Ment agrees: “The conclusion cannot be escaped that they [Campbell and the board of education] found acceptable or even desirable the segregation that they encouraged through official action.”

After a flurry of last-minute lobbying by Cosenza, the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies, Marcanitano, and numerous East Harlem organizations, the board of superintendents passed a resolution on 10 May 1934 for an Upper East Side high school, to be located in two annexes of DeWitt Clinton High School: P.S. 172 at 309 East 108th Street, and P.S. 53 at 211 East 79th Street. The New York press reported that the new school would encompass the East Harlem and Yorkville districts. The superintendents were also reportedly looking for a site for the “eventual erection of a modern high school building.” On 23 May the board of education formally approved the establishment of the new high school.

Tildsley authored the school district report that described the aim and purpose of the new East Harlem high school, as Tildsley put it, “a great social centre, open day and evening for boys and for adults to meet as many needs of this community as it can.” The existing academic and specialized high schools had ill served Italian East Harlem, Tildsley stipulated. “Many of them [Italians] have been attending Clinton preparing for college and a professional career. Some of them have been enrolled in Commerce and quite a large number in the Aviation Annex of Haaren. But for very many of them no one of the existing high schools gives them just the training they need. These are not book minded nor definitely mechanically minded.” The experimental comprehensive high school curriculum, giving students a choice among three courses of study—general (academic), commercial, and arts and crafts—would meet a broad range of needs and special interests.

Tildsley and Covello had known each other for more than twenty years, dating back to Covello’s early teaching days at DeWitt Clinton. A thirty-seven-year veteran of the New York City schools and a stalwart humanist, Tildsley believed that most of the new influx of high school students were “too inept or too indolent to master the time-honored subjects.”

Tildsley recognized that Covello would make the best of what Tildsley undoubtedly considered a Faustian bargain. For Covello a comprehensive high school was far preferable to a trade school, which some civic leaders in East Harlem had advocated. “An industrial high school,” he had declared at public meetings, “presumes to make trade workers of our boys. It suggests that the boys of East Harlem are not capable of doing academic work. This is exactly the kind of school we do not want.”

Tildsley undoubtedly had Covello in mind when he wrote that “the man selected as principal should be a man with social vision, the attitude of the social worker, gifted with great sympathy and understanding of all kinds of boys. . . . He should understand the needs and possibilities of the various racial groups, especially of the Italian boys.”

Recommendations for Covello’s appointment were received by the board of superintendents from the leaders of numerous organizations and constituencies in East Harlem and the city. Although it is difficult to imagine any other serious candidate for this position, the board of superintendents interviewed five applicants in addition to Covello. At the superintendents’ meeting of 13 June 1934, Covello “received a majority of the votes cast for the principalship of the new high school and was therefore recommended to the Board of Examiners for examination for license as a high school principal.” Formally appointed by the board of education on 12 September 1934, Covello became New York City’s first Italian American high school principal.

The New York Sun described Covello’s new position as “the most difficult ever assigned to a high school principal in this city. He will be required to organize a school that will be ‘all things to all boys.’ And he will long for the carefree days of 1917–18, when as a member of the Intelligence Service of the U.S.A., all he had to do was to keep track of thieves, deserters and spies.”

Undaunted, Covello wrote La Guardia “to assure you that those of us who will have the privilege of working in this community which, for many years, has been your own home community, will do everything in our power to help the boys in this community to realize the best that is in them. We shall strive to instill in them a sense of civic responsibility and a desire for social usefulness.”

Covello had only the summer to organize Benjamin Franklin High School from scratch. Tildsley issued a call for volunteers to teach at the new school, which he advertised as “intended to meet the needs of the boys who have found it difficult to adjust themselves adequately to the general high school.” According to one newspaper account, twenty-six “inspiring” teachers were chosen from the volunteer list in Tildsley’s office. On that list were five outstanding teachers recruited by Covello from the DeWitt Clinton staff: Abraham Kroll, Anmita Giscombe, Michael Decessare, Morris Deschel, and Harry Levene. (By the end of 1934–35, Covello would have a staff of 102 teachers, many of whom were not at the school voluntarily.) Without compensation, Abraham Kroll, a general science teacher and Covello’s new administrative assistant, worked throughout the summer helping the new principal get the high school ready for its September opening.

Thus began one of the most adventurous experiments in the history of U.S. urban education. In addition to working with the large Italian community of East Harlem, Benjamin Franklin would have to work with the shifting variety
of ethnic and racial groups in the area, to "test in a living situation . . . the oft
discussed idea that it was possible for people of different origins, coming from
many countries with differences in language and customs, to work together
to improve community living." By "creating a united front," the school could
now apply what had been learned through research such as the Boys' Club
Study. But a matter of the heart also compelled Covello. After seventeen
years as a teacher, he would finally be coming home to the neighborhood in
which he had grown up, "for home is and always will be where you start."68
Reflecting later on his visit to what would be the main building of the first
Benjamin Franklin High School, Covello recalled: "I turned the corner of
108th Street and Second Avenue and walked east for a short distance. I knew
exactly where the Franklin main building was located. I had turned that cor-
nor many evenings as a boy to go to the evening recreation center. The main
doors were open. I walked up a short flight of steps to the ground-floor—here
had been the recreation room—a piano, game tables; . . . over thirty years had
passed—nothing had changed—but nothing . . . I had come back to the
schools of my earliest days in America—the America of East Harlem at the
turn of the 20th century."69

Organizing the New High School

Benjamin Franklin opened its main building and Seventy-ninth Street Annex in
September 1934 with an enrollment of some 2,000 boys. The new high school
was filled to capacity: By November 1935 the total registration had reached
nearly 2,600. In the fall of 1935, the main building at East 108th Street oper-
ated on a double session, and in 1936 the high school had to open a second, tem-
porary annex on 117th Street.70 Enrollments would peak between 1935 and
1937, with 2,492 students listed on the average daily register, a number that
dropped steadily from 2,079 registered daily in 1937–38 to 1,726 in 1940–41.71

The tradeoff for the board of education's decision to locate Franklin in East
Harlem is evident in a report on the distribution of students by residence and
race as of March 1936. The high school was compelled to accept a sizeable pro-
portion of its student body from outside East Harlem and Yorkville. In March
1936, approximately 44 percent of the students resided in East Harlem, 22 per-
cent in Yorkville, 23 percent in the Bronx, 7 percent in downtown Manhattan,
3 percent in West Harlem, and about 1 percent in Queens and Brooklyn com-
bined.72 The school district's need for spaces for high school students clearly
took precedence over the concern that an imbalance of students from outside
East Harlem might jeopardize the project of community-centered schooling.
Covello and his allies may have won the political battle to site a new high
school in East Harlem, but henceforth they would have to do the bidding of

a massive school bureaucracy that was governed by an iron law of economy
and efficiency.

Reports compiled in 1941 and 1942 suggest that East Harlem students
became the majority at some point after 1936. There is no denying, however,
the problem that faced Covello as he tried to create a community school that
would be "all things to all boys," even boys from outside East Harlem.
Unabashedly Covello's highest priority was "to develop some kind of East
Harlem consciousness." Yet he was also painfully mindful that he would have
to "correlate the communal backgrounds" of non-East Harlem students to
that agenda.73

Every facet of the community high school's early operation was difficult,
particularly the baleful condition of the buildings. Throughout its years as a
scattered-site school, Franklin had continuous nagging problems with the out-
molded physical plants at the East 108th Street and 79th Street locations. These
problems were endemic citywide—the Depression forced severe cutbacks in
the board of education's budget for school-building maintenance and renova-
tion. With limited resources, Covello, his teachers, and workers provided by
the WPA jury-rigged the former elementary school buildings as a high school.
"Both buildings lacked, almost completely, adequate equipment for a modern
high school," Covello wrote. "It was a makeshift arrangement, but the best that
was possible under the circumstances."74 (The main building was actually two
buildings joined front to rear by a fourth-story bridge.)

Covello had to scrounge for furniture and equipment. The school library
consisted of "three rooms thrown together."75 An old toilet room in the open
yard of the main building was pressed into duty as a sculpture and pottery class-
room.76 The Music Department had to use the facilities of the Neighborhood
Music School at East 105th Street, where it "had the privilege of holding its
concert in the auditorium satisfactory as to seating capacity and acoustics."77
There were complaints of "drumming on the corrugated iron sheeting in
stairsways," "lassitude in keeping the building nominally clean," and "the lack of
soap and towels in the school's toilet."78 A teacher intern described the dismal
annex: The classrooms are so small that some of the boys must stand: a factor
that leads to the distraction of the standing students. . . . The seats in many of
the rooms are so small that the boys must keep their feet in the aisles.79 A
student complained: "We have been promised a basketball team. In this build-
ing and at the seventy-ninth street annex there is not a proper court to prac-
tice on. One cannot call a downstairs yard a proper gymnasium."80 Lastly, there
was the sheer ugliness of it all: "These buildings were not only unsuited to the
requirements of our high school work from the standpoint of space and equip-
ment but they were also unattractive. They needed thorough cleaning, remod-
eling, and repainting. There was not a vestige of beauty about them. This
very fact constituted a sort of damper on the enthusiasm of both students and
teachers. One of the first jobs undertaken was the re-conditioning and beautifying of the buildings themselves.81

The unsuitability of the physical plant and the chronic paucity of resources notwithstanding, Benjamin Franklin, in its formative period, 1934–41, strived to create what Gerald Grant calls a “strong positive ethos”—an intellectual and moral climate that galvanized community participation and student loyalty and sentiment.82 A graduating senior described his impression of the climate of the early high school: “The former annex on 79th Street was a hospital during the Civil War. Yet three years ago this same graduating class began its high school work in that antiquated structure. And the main building on 108th Street was not much better. Yet, it was there that we received the education of which we are now proud. No, it isn’t the building, the furniture, the age and condition of the school that makes it live in the hearts of all its students. It is the spirit. And that spirit did exist in Benjamin Franklin regardless of the condition of the building. We felt that spirit—that spirit of friendliness, fraternity, tolerance, and community interest.”83

Benjamin Franklin’s organizational structure figured prominently in the development of this ethos. Covello and his staff divided the community high school into two intertwined spheres of activities: the community program and the day high school (the latter including the regular curriculum and conventional extracurricular activities).

**Benjamin Franklin’s Community Program**

According to Covello’s statement of aims, Benjamin Franklin would function as a citizen-centered community school. More precisely, it would provide “adequate service to the community along educational, civic, social, and welfare lines”; restore “communal living” to the extent possible in a beleaguered urban neighborhood; create “more harmonious” interethnic relationships; cultivate an East Harlem leadership core dedicated to “creating the finest possible background for the life of the community as a whole”; and extend the school’s benefits to all members of the community.84 Covello’s rationale for the school as an enabling vehicle for these aims—and an integrative catalyst for constructive social change—is worth quoting at length:

The Benjamin Franklin High School takes the position that the school is the logical agency through which these desirable ends may be achieved. Through it, all of the constructive forces in the community can be concentrated behind the movement for a better neighborhood life. The school touches practically every home in the community. It commands the respect of the community as a whole by reason of the fact that it is a school. It is non-sectarian and non-political. It represents an investment by the people. This investment should pay dividends in service by which the whole school, adequately staffed, shall become available at all times for the use of the people of the community. The school has trained personnel at its command to guide the expressive activities of which the community has a great need. It has resources and technical equipment that permit intelligent planning and wise co-ordination of community resources and community activities.85

Covello and his associates created three community-centered structures for organizing citizen participation in the affairs of the high school and their project of local democratic development: the Community Advisory Council (CAC), the “street unit,” and the WPA adult school. Each structure had an explicit educational role that supported and complemented the activities of the day-school curriculum. Although its influence would wane after 1942, the CAC, the high school’s entry portal to city and state politics, would indelibly stamp East Harlem’s diverse social terrain.

**Community Advisory Council**

Within a year of Franklin’s opening, East Harlem began an extensive neighborhood study, the first to receive the support of the Mayor’s Committee on City Planning, in cooperation with the Works Progress Administration. This study was one of a dozen or more in the city intended to “lead to more active, intelligent and continuing efforts for the betterment of the community by the residents themselves.”86 Helen Harris, head worker at Union Settlement, served as chair until she was succeeded by Miriam Sanders of Harlem House; Covello served on the sponsoring committee along with representatives from other local agencies.87 East Harlem’s community-coordinated approach, housed in the Union Settlement buildings, became a model for other New York City neighborhoods’ social planning efforts. For Covello, “it established conclusively the idea that a continuing community survey is an essential part of the program of any community-centered school.”88 Covello quickly institutionalized a means for coordinating and acting upon such research, organizing Franklin’s community advisory council (CAC) in the fall of 1935.

The stated purpose of the CAC was “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.”89 The council, which over the years comprised an array of school-community committees, each assigned to a specific problem area in East Harlem, coordinated the work of the various committees and mediated the ebb and flow of information and resources between the school and the community. The school-community committees were the task forces of the council, responsible for problem-solving initiatives and advocacy campaigns in their respective areas.
Covello’s formulation of the CAC benefited from national and regional dialogues about coordinating councils. For example, Covello tapped materials of the National Probation Association, a leading proponent of this approach, for a graduate course on community coordination that he taught at New York University in 1937–38. When a key panel of a national conference addressed problems of community coordination, Covello joined nationally prominent figures in sharing their experiences. At least some members of his staff were familiar with this trend as well. In addition, Covello drew from the work of his dissertation advisor, New York University sociologist Frederic Thrasher, who advocated community approaches to preventing juvenile delinquency and played a prominent role in several initiatives in the New York/New Jersey area. According to Thrasher: “Sociologically speaking...the individual delinquent is far less important than the community influences which create him.” Covello, in turn, urged schools to focus on the community’s fundamental educational problems, broadly understood, in order to “correct the causes of maladjustment.” Thrasher cited Harvard criminologist Eleanor Glueck, who concurred with this view and argued that, in general, the public school was best poised to effect the “purposful organization of social forces” and to “create an adjustment of relationships between the people.” Glueck further noted that the public school would prove “the most suitable center” because it was “non-sectarian, non-partisan, non-exclusive in character, and widespread in its influence upon the life of the people through their children.”

At its first meeting, 15 October 1935, the CAC reported a membership of 120 people and the participation of thirty-one organizations. The committees included representatives of social agencies, churches, and civic groups in East Harlem, as well as various community leaders. Covello even invited prominent officials from outside East Harlem to participate—Parks Commissioner Robert Moses politely declined the invitation to join the health committee. Student leaders also joined the committees. Board of education president George Ryan and Congressman Vito Marcantonio led an impressive group of speakers in applauding the council’s formation and in emphasizing the great need for “projecting the citizenship work of the school into activities of outside organizations,” as well as “bringing welfare and civic groups into the curriculum of the school.” Five school-community committees were initially organized: Health, Citizenship, Parent Education, Correction and Guidance, and Racial. Covello vested leadership of these and subsequently organized committees in his teachers, with the community’s approval or at least its acquiescence. Harold Fields, one of Covello’s stalwart teachers and chair of Franklin’s Social Studies Department, served as the school’s community coordinator and chaired the CAC executive committee. By mid-October 1935, the CAC had gained the support of most East Harlem social and political leaders, and even the endorsement of Mayor La Guardia.

By the spring of 1937, twenty-two committees were operating, “covering the full gamut of neighborhood needs,” with considerable duplication of effort and attenuation of resources. Realizing that the school had too many committees, Covello and the council consolidated the work to some extent by reducing the number to eighteen in the fall of that year. Several committees played key roles in major community-mobilization campaigns to improve the quality of life in East Harlem (for discussion see Chapter 6).

**Street Units**

One of the distinguishing features of Benjamin Franklin High School in the years 1934–41—and unique to that period—was the concept of the street unit; as Covello put it, “a unit that functions literally in the street.” Directly challenging and bridging the spatial distinction between school and community, the Benjamin Franklin street units housed recreation, research, and educational activities that encouraged community members, business owners, parents, teachers, and students to work together to improve the quality of neighborhood life. The street-unit clubs and bureaus were located in reconstructed storefronts on the same block of East 108th Street as Franklin’s main building. Some of the names—Friends and Neighbors Club, Old Friendship Club, and Association of Parents, Teachers, and Friends—unambiguously reflected the high school’s stated goal of restoring “communal living” in East Harlem.

When the high school first opened, it operated, in addition to the day school, an afternoon community playground for neighborhood children and an evening community center for adults. Community-outreach activities were initially restricted to school property, as street units were not included in the original plan of the high school. Exigencies such as crowded space and inadequate equipment necessitated the development of exterior facilities. Organized in November 1934, with an early membership of 250 men and women, the Association of Parents, Teachers, and Friends (PTF) stimulated the development of street units and the expansion of the high school into the surrounding neighborhood. Hearing of the PTF’s plan for “a pleasant social center,” interested neighbors in the surrounding blocks arranged for the communal use of one of the buildings adjacent to the high school. Nathan Jacobson, the owner of apartment buildings at 315–317 East 108th Street, donated two dilapidated storefronts rent free for one year for use as a social center. Neighborhood men and American Legion volunteers removed the partition between the two stores and performed cleaning and repair work; good-neighbor Jacobson provided wall paneling and painted the exterior of the stores. Anna Giacobbe, Covello, and Jacobson donated furniture for the clubrooms. The Friends and Neighbors Community Club opened on 25 September 1937, with Mary Carter Winter, a WPA employee assigned to Franklin’s community-center program, serving as president (Winter was also president of the PTF).
In 1938, the Friends and Neighbors Club at 315 East 108th Street, just two doors removed from the high school, was the first of five “made-over” storefronts (formerly candy, cigar, and grocery stores) to be impressed for school use with the cooperation of neighborhood landlords who charged only five to ten dollars monthly rent. The club’s calendar for the fall of 1938 indicates that the high school’s Music Department used the clubrooms in the morning from 9:00 until 12:00; lunch was scheduled from noon to 2:30; an adult hand-sewing class met daily from 2:30 to 3:30 P.M. Tuesday through Friday the club remained opened the remainder of the afternoon for general community use. The storefront was reserved every Monday from 3:30 to 6:00 for school departmental meetings, and boys’ and girls’ social clubs used the facility on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. The East Harlem Housing Committee and the PTF also scheduled meetings at the Friends and Neighbors Club, whose facilities were available free of charge to any club in the area. “Much thought goes into the fixing of the ‘clubrooms,’ reported the New York Times in 1939. “Soft plush chairs and sofas—gifts from the neighborhood—line the room. . . A gas range and sink in the rear of the store provide an opportunity to make light lunches and serve refreshments. A few ferns, somewhat faded, in the windows give a quiet, homelike atmosphere. The neighbors got together and raised $34 for venetian blinds.”

Spearheading the high school’s cleanup and beautification campaign in 1938–39, the Friends and Neighbors Club concentrated on building a neighborhood “friendship garden” on a vacant lot, the site of a demolished rookery, described as “an open space 60 by 125 feet, which had been filled in with debris and very poor dirt . . . [and was] a very unsightly blot upon the street.” Inaugurated in 1938, the garden project did not go smoothly, primarily because the project organizers could not locate sufficient topsoil, a problem that had not been resolved as late as December 1939, when Mary Carter Winter complained: “We have had great difficulty in securing dirt in New York City. I never realized how impossible it is to get just plain dirt in a city like this.” Winter was more successful in locating plants for the new garden, requesting and obtaining free of charge three hundred hyacinth and three hundred tulip bulbs from the mayor of Haarlem, the Netherlands. She helped organize a Junior Garden Club of neighborhood children ages eight to sixteen, who potted the seedlings until topsoil for the garden could be located. When Winter requested cuttings from nearby Jefferson Park, however, she was stymied by a parsimonious bureaucrat in Robert Moses’s office at the City Parks Commission: “You can readily understand that if this were started we would in the end be furnishing plants and other materials for many people in the city who might not have as good a reason for wanting them as you have.” In 1941, when Covello listed the projects that had been successfully completed with neighbors in the three-hundred block of East 108th Street, he did not list the “friendship garden.” The Friends and Neighbors Club was more successful in its “block beautiful” campaign, inspiring the school’s neighbors to beautify their tenement apartments; as one report indicated: “Many of the families living on the block have already started window gardens and there are several roof gardens in the neighborhood.”

Four other street units followed the Friends and Neighbors Club—storefronts rejuvenated by students, teachers, and community members “with paint brushes swinging, plaster trowels wielded and hammers pounding.” One storefront was used as the Community Friendship Club, an association of Franklin graduates and dropouts. In the fall of 1936, Covello invited every Franklin dropout since 1934 to meet with teachers at the high school to explore ways to help dropouts with personal and employment problems. According to one participant at the November 5 meeting: “We feel that in the event . . . there should be an opening where we work or elsewhere, we should get in touch with other boys who have dropped out and thus find work for them.” In 1937 the “Old Friendship Club” listed 150 active members, with Mary Giacobbe, a popular Franklin teacher, as its director. This club was superseded by the Benjamin Franklin High School Alumni Association, which was established in October 1938. In March 1939 the Alumni Association reconstituted itself as the Community Friendship Club; the storefront it occupied at 302 East 108th Street was also the meeting place for community organizations that could not be accommodated by the overbooked Friends and Neighbors Club. Like the other storefront clubs, the Community Friendship Club was disbanded after the move to the new Benjamin Franklin High School in February 1942.

A second storefront in the building at 302 East 108th Street housed the Friends and Neighbors Library, which operated five afternoons a week in 1940–41. Staffed by community volunteers, the library had no funds and only four hundred books, for which there was a surprisingly great neighborhood demand. “The interest created by this small library has been amazing,” Covello remarked. “The children literally stormed the door to get in; and the problem has been to keep them out until we could count and list the books.” Covello and Mary Carter Winter headed a publicity campaign to obtain books and games for the library. Station WQXR told its listeners on 11 June 1940: “If you have old books to give away here is the place for you to send them. Children’s books, stories, and books simply told but finely written in which American tradition, American history and American folk tales have been given meaning. Incidentally, jig-saw puzzles are welcome, too. You, who like books, will soon understand what a good deed you can do by giving away spare books—a good idea with many sides to it. It can help to fight the isms, too.”

The two other street units on the three-hundred block of East 108th Street, located in the same building as the Friends and Neighbors Club, were the Italo-American Educational Bureau and the Hispano-American Educational Bureau, which planned educational programs and provided...
employment and citizenship/naturalization services to Italian- and Spanish-speaking people, respectively. Covello transferred the files of the by then defunct Casa Italiana Educational Bureau to the Italo-American Educational Bureau in the late 1930s. In December 1940 he incorporated the East Harlem Educational and Research Bureau as a nonprofit umbrella organization for the street units, the East Harlem News, and a new community research bureau, which he housed on the third floor of the National City Bank, at 357 East 116th Street. Coupled with individual contributions, the proceeds from the social activities of several Italian American groups, and from dances and feste at the high school, provided limited funding for these organizations, which, with the exception of the East Harlem News, were terminated after the move to the new Benjamin Franklin High School.

The East Harlem News operated under the auspices of the East Harlem Educational and Research Bureau as a nonprofit, bipartisan publishing venture from March 1941 to January 1943. When he first broached the idea of a school-based community newspaper in 1939, Covello envisaged a medium that would foster a sense of community among the district's variegated and often contentious ethnic groups, particularly the Italians and Puerto Ricans. It would be "a home-town newspaper"—a vehicle "to promote community pride and cooperation, interracial good will, and good citizenship," supported by local advertising, subscriptions, and donations. The newspaper staff assembled by Covello included faculty and community members and students in the high school's journalism class. Fifteen thousand strategically distributed leaflets advertised the East Harlem News before the release of its first issue. "To finance our introductory issue," Covello recalled, "we held a folk festival in the grand ballroom of the Yorkville Casino. The Coro d'Italia I had organized at Columbia was there under the direction of Maestro Benelli. We had Negro dances and folk songs and spirituals, Irish jigs and ballads, Czechoslovak polkas, a German chorus, and the Pan-American singers of Benjamin Franklin. This festival netted us several hundred dollars and set the presses running for the East Harlem News." The first issue inaugurated a campaign for a hospital in East Harlem (see Chapter 6). Over a two-year period, the staff published twelve issues, with a respectable circulation ranging from five thousand to ten thousand copies per issue. Discontinued in 1943 "because of the financial bugaboo," publication of the East Harlem News was never resumed.

The WPA And Adult Education At Benjamin Franklin

In April 1935 the U.S. Congress authorized $4.8 billion to create the Works Progress Administration. Fiorello La Guardia's close relationship with Franklin Roosevelt, coupled with his tireless lobbying of New Deal potentates in Washington, assured that New York City would garner a large share of the WPA relief monies. By October 1935 "the New Deal's favorite municipal officer" had leveraged more than two hundred thousand WPA job slots for New York City, far ahead of any other municipality; in 1936 one-seventh of all WPA relief monies went to New York City. WPA largesse supported the labor force that made possible many of the community programs at Benjamin Franklin High School. As of 1938, sixty-nine WPA workers, thirty-eight of whom were listed as teachers, were assigned to the high school for sundry jobs. Significant as the WPA was in providing assistance to the high school in the areas of research, recreation, counseling, remedial reading, and adult education, it proved, as we will soon see, to be a mixed blessing from Covello's perspective.

Of the twenty-five research projects undertaken at Benjamin Franklin High School by 1942, the WPA was involved in nine; two of these WPA-affiliated projects were sponsored by the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau. The WPA projects included a study of delinquency among Italians and non-Italians based on 1916 and 1931 records (showing a disproportionately high rate among Italian boys and the reverse for Italian girls); a block-by-block study of ethnic distribution in East Harlem; a study of motion pictures in the life of Benjamin Franklin High School students (highlighting attitudes and preferences); a study of leisure-time patterns of high school students; a sociological study of an Italian neighborhood in East Harlem; a study of patterns of delinquency in East Harlem; a study of dropouts and graduates of the high school (highlighting the role of parents in the decision to drop out); and a study of the home backgrounds of "problem" students at the high school. National Youth Administration workers participated in two studies; personnel from the Italo-American Educational Bureau, faculty of the school, and (in two cases) students provided the working staff for other studies. At the same time, Covello was disappointed because constant changes in WPA personnel and planning disrupted school activities and because many WPA research projects had to be abandoned before the research was completed.

That Covello could keep the main building open continuously from 8:30 in the morning until 10:00 each evening was attributable to the WPA, which supplied the supervisors for the community recreation program. He described the afternoon and evening programs this way: "Practically every square inch of space in the school building is in use in the evening. The lower floor is given over to a recreational program for children and for grownups. Children under fourteen use the indoor playground in the afternoon from 3 to 6 P.M. From 7 to 10 the older boys and girls and the adults are admitted. A 'Kindergarten Group' of young children have been given a 'club room' in the evening also because they are always at the door of the school pleading for admittance."

In 1938, two youth clubs, the Silver Hordes and the Zeniths, held regular meetings at the recreation center; in the summer the center operated a vacation playground and "wholesome activity and hobbies" for the children of East Harlem and Yorkville, whom Covello wanted "off the streets and in the
playgrounds." The recreation center operated "in the face of overwhelming obstacles—lack of space and equipment"—until about November 1939, when WPA cutbacks forced suspension of the program.138

WPA personnel also operated counseling and remedial reading programs in the day school and, under the aegis of the Federal Music Project, the high school's Vigo Drum and Bugle Corps and student music programs. In 1938 school counselor Elizabeth Roby summed up the WPA's contribution to the guidance office, where thirty-eight workers held jobs as typists, clerks, counselors, and messengers: "The chief benefit has been that the assignment of these workers has enabled us to keep complete records of work done for the student, regarding cutting, lateness, attendance, guidance, interviews, home visits, contact with Social Agencies, book records, etc."129 In 1937 a remedial reading bureau staffed by nineteen WPA teachers reported an average reading increase of two-and-a-half years in the fall term alone for 160 boys enrolled in the special program; in 1938, the bureau reported 279 teaching periods weekly, serving between 177 and 208 pupils.130 Needless to say, these day-school services were not extended beyond the period of WPA support. WPA personnel staffed the adult afternoon and evening school, as well as the adult summer school at Benjamin Franklin High School, offering courses ranging from English and citizenship aid to bookkeeping, stenography, and homemaking, to Italian, history, art, and music. When the adult education program opened in the summer of 1936, it registered only 63 students. Under Mary Carter Winter's leadership, the program increased from a registration of 260 in the summer of 1937 to 2,300, with an average daily attendance of 1,233 by January 1939.131 One WPA senior official proclaimed Benjamin Franklin High School "one of the sensational successes in the present Adult Education Movement in the City."132 Covello described the program as it stood early in 1938 as follows: "Today more than seventeen hundred adults have been registered. There are forty-six classes and twenty-six teachers in the school. It is of interest to note here that five teachers of English to the foreign-born have been assigned to the Adult School and that three naturalization aid instructors, who speak several languages, are assigned to the school. So that we are prepared to give daily service along these lines to members of the community who do not speak English and who are having difficulties with their naturalization papers."133

Franklin's adult school was part of a larger citywide program of WPA education projects sponsored by the board of education, the adult education component of which employed 3,629 workers in 1937–38.134 Concurrently with the WPA projects, the board maintained an evening elementary school division, which since the early 1900s had provided free schooling in English and citizenship training to the city's foreign-born adults.135 In 1937, forty-four evening elementary schools were serving some twenty-three thousand adult learners in New York City; yet the board of education estimated that about 250,000 New Yorkers were "just barely able to read and write English with a proficiency equal to that of the average nine or ten-year old child in our public schools."132 By 1938, the board, perhaps anticipating the demise of the WPA adult school, had designated Benjamin Franklin High School as an evening elementary school.

The teacher allotment for the program included regular evening-school teachers assigned by the board of education and a supplemental allotment of WPA teachers. In 1939 Franklin's joint program offered thirteen classes in English and citizenship, seven in the evening elementary school, and six in the WPA adult school. It was not a peaceable arrangement. The licensed teachers who controlled the evening elementary school resented the WPA teachers and worked for their ouster. One evening elementary school administrator tactfully put the matter this way: "The WPA teachers were in the main inexperienced. They made up for that by their willingness to be guided and their devotion to the task. However, it is recommended that no WPA teachers be assigned to a regular class thereby displacing a licensed individual qualified to do the task. These WPA instructors should be assigned to help the regular staff by dealing with small groups of students who need special attention and individualized instruction."137

Covello's hope that the adult school would become "the center of many neighborhood activities"138 was partially realized in the spring of 1938, when nine social clubs (choral, German, French, Hungarian, faculty players, American, Italian, journalism, and dance) were formed.139 Yet Covello believed that WPA control of the adult school, separate from his management of the high school, thwarted the more effective integration of neighborhood activities, and he called for consolidating authority and supervision for the adult school in the office of the day-school principal. Moreover, community leaders, participating on advisory boards like Franklin's Community Advisory Council, should have "the power to plan specifically for neighborhood needs in each community on the basis of an actual survey of the neighborhood to be served by the adult center."140

The federal bureaucracy continually frustrated Covello. In 1939 he lost eight WPA teachers when Congress invoked the so-called eighteen-month rule, requiring the dismissal of all WPA employees who had worked for eighteen months or longer. The high school's WPA personnel manager complained to Covello: "By January we'll have no counselor, clerk, typist, assistant center head for the Adult Education unit—due to the 18 month rule and no replacements. This means I'll be tied hand and foot to the Adult Education classroom program, or will have to train volunteers, etc."141

Lamenting these vicissitudes, Covello argued that "the phase of the program undertaken by the WPA should be put on a stable basis and... it should not be subject to the disintegration that follows unexpected dismissals. Nor is it practical to project large and permanent plans of education when these programs are dependent upon personnel with no status in the regular school system."142 (An adult high school sponsored by the board of education
at the new Franklin building later in the 1940s would not be linked to the community program.)

The Day High School

During Covello's tenure Benjamin Franklin High School was an all-male institution. A statement survives from 1938 suggesting that the grounds for this policy were pragmatic, not ideological. "The school is located in a foreign-born community," Covello noted. "The majority of parents of foreign origin are opposed to co-education. It is contrary to their established modes of thought. It violates codes that are still rigidly approved by the older generation." By no means was a single-sex high school an anomaly in New York City, which had thirteen such institutions by the mid-1930s. Following the "cosmopolitan" model of the time, Benjamin Franklin High School sought to be "all things to all boys" by offering students a range of curricular options, including a traditional academic course of study, commercial subjects, industrial arts, and fine arts. In practice, being all things to all boys did not diminish the difficulties that were endemic to efforts to provide a high school education for youth of the ethnic poor and working classes in Depression-afflicted East Harlem. While Benjamin Franklin pushed its students toward academic success through a variety of tailored programs and helping mechanisms, like many New York high schools of its day it had to fight continuously against low attendance rates, poor academic performance, and high incidences of dropping out. In the face of these challenges and the attitudes of "downtown" school officials who had written off many of his students as unfit for high school, Covello struggled to hold the high ground of academic standards in no small part to disprove the presumption of East Harlem youths' intellectual incapacity.

"We were determined to use all our resources to meet city and state requirements for graduation, including state Regents' Examinations for the academic diploma," Covello recalled in his autobiography. "In fact, a survey based on a questionnaire done by the mathematics department showed that many of our students wanted to feel they could continue on to college and would not have voluntarily accepted a modified course. The idea of a 'watered-down' curriculum, insisted upon for this type of community in so many quarters, was rejected by the pupils themselves." According to a scholarship report for the spring term 1936, foreign-language enrollments stood at 2,219, compared to an average daily register of 2,482 students for 1935–36. The 1936 report indicates that in addition to taking foreign languages (five were offered), more than 1,300 Franklin students took mathematics, with elementary algebra and plane geometry in the ninth and tenth grades respectively. Not surprisingly, the numbers dwindled in the higher-level math courses: trigonometry, advanced algebra, and solid geometry. Just over 1,100 students took science, with general science in ninth grade and biology in tenth. A smaller group of students took chemistry and physics in the final two years. By comparison, enrollments in "commercial" courses—business training, commercial arithmetic, and bookkeeping—and courses in stenography, crafts, and mechanical drawing were all significantly lower. Just under 200 students were enrolled in shop, woodwork, and printing combined.

We speculate that Covello wanted to prove that "my boys," especially the Italians, could succeed on the same terms as New York's more advantaged high school students. Certainly many of the students graduated with high expectations. Of the school's 1,340 graduates between 1936 and 1939, 729, or 54 percent, applied to postsecondary institutions—612 to City College, 109 to Brooklyn College, 124 to NYU, 54 to Fordham, and 42 to Columbia. According to a 1937 survey, 72 percent of Franklin graduates said they planned to continue their education; of this group slightly more than half planned to enter a profession, and about 6 percent were undecided. Unfortunately, we do not know the actual rate of college attendance for these Franklin students; nor do we know the school's cohort graduation rates. Board of education reports for this period, problematically, did not include individual high school graduation data. Counts of senior photographs in Franklin's yearbooks provide a rough proxy, suggesting that 1936 through 1939 were the high school's watershed years for producing graduates.

The available statistical reports suggest that the fledgling high school, for all Covello's prodigious efforts, fought a steep uphill battle to educate the youths, many of them overage for their grade, who thronged Franklin's main building and annexes. On the few performance rankings for which the board of education reported comparative data (arrayed in tables and graphs), the East Harlem high school held a number of lower-end citywide rankings. In 1937–38, for example, it ranked forty-fourth of forty-seven day high schools in average daily attendance. More pointedly, in the spring term it ranked forty-fifth of forty-seven day high schools in percentage of courses failed. In the spring of 1941, Franklin had the highest percentage of courses failed among the day high schools. Dropouts appear to have been a serious problem, as suggested by the presence of the Old Friendship Club and dropout reports compiled in 1937–38. For the fall of 1937, 353 dropouts were reported versus 237 graduates for that term; 300 of the dropouts had four or more course failures on their record. A WPA study of 322 dropouts and graduates released in the summer of 1937 showed "that almost half of the [125] drop-outs left school 'to go to work,' and less than a fifth because they 'disliked school'. . . . During an average time out of school of about one year, three-fourths of the drop-outs studied found jobs and held them for at least three months" (original emphasis). A second report filed with the WPA study, however, identified school failure and aimlessness as prevalent factors in the decision to withdraw from school. In this
case a guidance counselor interviewed 224 dropouts and found that 39 percent (87) were neither employed nor in a trade or night-school program. Of this group, the counselor wrote: "With the exception of a few I have to admit they are irresponsible and void of all ambition... From this group I received the greatest number of reasons for leaving school and the reasons are all narrowed down to one. There is a strong dislike for school... This group seems content to drift along with 'the crowd,' frequenting poolrooms, movies and street corners." In his 1944 dissertation, Covello acknowledged that dropping out was "a conspicuous aspect of high school attendance in the East Harlem community"; here he made particular reference to Italian Harlem.

Obviously, Franklin High School students' academic performance was not what it should have been. Yet for all these problems, Covello remained unflinching in his commitment to the community school idea. While his dissertation underscored the domus antipathy to secondary education, he optimistically pointed to a 1943 opinion poll at Franklin showing that "during the last ten years there has been an improvement in the school attitude and behavior of Italian students." Covello apparently thought that his approach would eventually overcome the domus mindset, that given sufficient duration and sustained resources, community-centered schooling would turn the tide of educational failure in East Harlem.

That this ambitious endeavor did not achieve the academic outcomes Covello had hoped for (after all, these were extraordinarily parlous times) in no way diminishes the importance of his efforts. He astutely recognized that the school had an appropriate role to play in the reconstruction of urban communal life, in concert with other community organizations. Furthermore, he understood that the school's fulfillment of this role was a necessary condition for his students' academic achievement. With all its blemishes, Franklin High School illustrates concretely the range of complex issues that must be faced if we take seriously the advanced conception of democracy and citizenship Covello always held in view.

In its quotidian routines, which were spread across a seven-period day that began at 8:40 A.M. and ended at 3:00 P.M., Franklin's day school was not highly distinguishable from other New York City high schools. Although there were some powerful linkages to community issues and concerns, the curriculum was never reconstructed to be systematically progressive or community centered. As a general rule at Franklin, community studies were subordinated to subject-centered education. The community component functioned mainly on an ad hoc basis: As socially significant problems reached crisis proportions, they were integrated into the curriculum. Innovative curricular units on intercultural relations and housing (see Chapters 5 and 6, respectively), which were focal points of student interest and activism, were not expanded into sustained, problem-focused courses that integrated academic subject matter and higher-order intellectual skills. Teaching and learning at Franklin remained largely teacher and subject centered; "constructivist" or "authentic" teaching (to use the contemporary argot) and curricular integration were the exception rather than the rule. Rather than experimenting with the difficult and perhaps risky multidisciplinary integration and pedagogical reorientation that would have been involved in building a curriculum that was more thoroughly community centered, Covello and his staff chose pragmatically to limit curricular experimentation to a single community studies course for a selective group of top students, as we will see.

By the mid-1930s, the climate of the New York City schools was such that Covello probably had a warrant to experiment more broadly. In rhetoric at least, the city schools were a hotbed of progressive activity, which originated with a large-scale program in the elementary schools and was targeted to percolate upward into the high schools.

In September 1935 Superintendent Harold Campbell, who was gravely concerned about rampant problems of "maladjustment" and "retardation" in the city schools, introduced an "activity program" in the city's elementary schools. Organized as a six-year experiment, the activity program involved sixty-nine schools (10 percent of all elementary schools), more than seventy-five thousand students, and 2,250 teachers; in these schools, 85 percent of the teachers and 83 percent of the pupils participated in the program. In theory at least, the activity program featured a greater emphasis on children's creative projects, for example, in art and poetry; more attention to class discussions and small group work; fewer restrictions on children's movement in the classroom; and a general shift from subject-centered to child-centered teaching. To what extent did the so-called activity classrooms actually implement these progressive practices? The evidence is inconclusive and certainly did not warrant Campbell's claim in 1942 that significant change had occurred in the participating schools. Though a great deal of data was generated, little of it was based on direct observations of classrooms. It seems that most teachers in the activity classrooms incorporated some progressive activities but did not change their practice in fundamental ways. More germane here, to what extent did the philosophy of the activity program percolate into the city high schools? Based on an analysis of 152 descriptions and photographs of New York high school classrooms during the interwar years, historian Larry Cuban concludes that progressivism had little significant impact at this level—teacher-centered instruction was overwhelmingly the dominant instructional pattern.

Whereas Campbell's version of pedagogical progressivism was child-centered, Covello's approach linked a particular curriculum unit or set of activities to a comprehensive social reform strategy. It seems reasonable to speculate that had World War II not intruded upon that strategy, Covello would have worked out a set of community problem-based courses to systematize what was to that point largely an ad hoc approach; in fact, he began that kind of systematic
planning in the mid-1950s, albeit tentatively in a milieu that was no longer friendly to progressive education and lacking the federal support he had enjoyed in the late 1930s.

UNSURPRISINGLY, NEITHER BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S community centeredness nor its "cosmopolitan" curriculum drew public attention to the high school beyond East Harlem and Yorkville. In the prewar years Benjamin Franklin achieved respectability in the pantheon of New York City's high schools largely on the strength of its day-school extracurricular program. In 1936 the school contributed seventeen singers and eight musicians to a student choir and symphony conducted by Walter Damrosch at the National Music Festival at Madison Square Garden—a distinction the student newspaper cited as "definite proof that our school has won a deserved recognition among the high schools of established standing." Students further proclaimed that "Franklin has met the challenge of other high schools on the sport field and in the classroom, and has fought its way to the top. The 'critical period' is passed. We now emerge as a unified red-blooded member of New York's educational system." In 1938, Franklin, "the smallest school of the school boy basketball circuit," won the city championship by defeating Newtown High School 29–27 in a game "played before a gallery of 3,700 excitement-mad fans." In the hyperbole characteristic of that era's student journalism, the Franklin Almanac proclaimed: "It was the result of hard work, against insurmountable odds, but our boys came through." In 1941 the high school listed forty-one extracurricular clubs and student groups. The General Organization (G.O.), a dues-paying student organization open to all students, coordinated extracurricular activities, club funds, and tickets to special events. The Student Congress, with fifty-two elected representatives and an elected slate of four officers, was primarily an advisory body to Covello. Other prominent student groups included the Italian Club, orchestra and choral club, Arista (National Honor Society), and Almanac (student newspaper).

Student participation in the deliberations of the Community Advisory Council committees was, as a rule, restricted to juniors and seniors in the Student Congress and seniors in the special leadership class at the high school. In other words, two paths led students to the CAC and a role in planning broadly based community initiatives, one extracurricular, the other curricular. Through the problem-based pedagogy of the leadership class, the curricular path to the CAC provided structured opportunities for learning participatory and problem-solving skills.

For the leadership class, teachers nominated boys "who seem to possess more than an ordinary amount of leadership ability. . . . The selection is made by our chairmen at a meeting at which the qualifications of proposed members of the group are freely discussed." In 1940 Covello described this class as follows: "Members of this class are given every opportunity to study the community, to make contacts with social situations conducive to leadership development, and to participate in radio broadcasts, neighborhood entertainments, community conferences, and all types of activity in the school and the community. In class, these boys are making a rather intensive study of contemporaneous American life. Members of this group are sent, as representatives of the school, to important meetings in New York City and elsewhere. Delegates have gone in this way to such meetings as the Constitutional Celebration for New York State at Poughkeepsie, to Albany for observance of Constitution Day, to Washington to various Youth congresses, to the World Youth Conference at Poughkeepsie, to local conferences in the metropolitan area, and to the recent conference on negro [sic] problems in Washington."

A syllabus for the leadership class, "American History and Social Problems in Light of American Literature," describes what appears to have been the only course with a community problem-based approach that was integral to the course.

Class Work—Each student will be asked to select a problem and follow it through in the field of American literature. Students will be grouped in accordance with the problem they have selected, and each group will report to the class at stated intervals on the results of and the inferences to be drawn from their reading.

Field Work—Each group will be required to do actual field work in its own phase of the general subject. For example, the group studying problems of the slum will be expected to make personal investigation of actual slum conditions; the group studying the problem of the "melting pot" will be expected to ascertain through actual observation and personal investigation the difficulties presented in the adjustment of racial differences and animosities; and the group studying the problems of education under our American democracy will be asked to visit schools where noteworthy attempts are being made to achieve democracy in education—for instance, the Herman Ridder Junior High School. In other cases, as, for instance, in that of the problem of peace and war, students will be expected to get into personal touch with agencies working in the field, such as . . . World Peace Ways. The active assistance of the Department of Social Sciences will be enlisted in the attempt to make this field work fruitful of results.

The leadership class was conceptualized as the kind of "project curriculum" William Heard Kilpatrick advocated in his "social frontier" essays at Teachers College, and Covello was undoubtedly influenced by Kilpatrick. By the 1930s Kilpatrick, who inspired an "incredible spate of books" on the activity
curriculum in the 1920s, had loosed his moorings in child-centered pedagogy and adopted a social-change approach to classroom project development. Aligning himself with Columbia University's social reconstructionists, the "Teachers College crowd," Kilpatrick emphasized the need for greater linkage between classroom work and the "purposeful activity" of the community. In his introduction to Paul Hanna's Youth Serves Community, Kilpatrick asserted that the truly educative situation brought youth and adults in a community together in a shared enterprise, one in which "each can have his own responsible part." Here was "the education in which democracy can most rejoice, particularly in these times when we must learn to put the public welfare first in point of time and importance. In solemn fact, cooperative activities for community improvement form the vision of the best education yet conceived" (original emphasis). Beyond the leadership class, "cooperative activities for community improvement" infused other courses at Benjamin Franklin on an ad hoc basis in conjunction with the high school's intercultural program (Chapter 5) and the CAC's East Harlem campaigns (Chapter 6).

In December 1937, forty-one students were listed as participants and voting members of CAC committees; a revised list published around 1938 showed sixty-three students on fourteen committees. The rest of the students participated in committee projects and activities. For the East Harlem housing campaign, "all students of the school filled out questionnaires on the housing conditions under which they live. Committee members helped to prepare a chart of living conditions in the community from these questionnaires. The chart gave helpful information in the fight for a low-cost housing project in East Harlem. Essays on housing as well as models and scenes of the community were prepared by the boys." With respect to health issues: "Two student members of the School-Community Health Committee are members of the East Harlem Health Center Committee. They attend meetings and report to the school committee the latest information of interest to the community on the vital question of health. Visits of the entire student body to the Health Center have been arranged. A faculty conference at the East Harlem Health Center at which the Health Commissioner of the City spoke was attended by student representatives. The boys of the committee were pioneers in the drive for the administration of the Tuberculin Tests and Chest X-Ray examinations." In his speeches and writings, Covello eschewed au courant psychoanalytic and deterministic interpretations that portrayed youth as inherently volatile, tumultuous, and untrustworthy. He believed that adolescence was a period of benign growth, when young people acquired large capacities for sociality and empathy. The high school's role was to develop these natural tendencies, to cultivate in young people a disposition joined with a capability for social service and civic action. As suggested by the selective processes underlying student participation in the leadership class and on CAC committees, Covello's vision was also meritocratic: Participation at this level was an earned privilege. Covello wanted to train a leadership class for East Harlem, a service-minded elite that W.E.B. DuBois elsewhere designated "the talented tenth." A former student who remembered his own role as "a kind of liaison man between the student body and the community organization proper [CAC] and so served on almost all the committee panels—health, citizenship, racial relations, education"—explained to Covello: "I don't have to tell you about how the inspiration of us Franklin students were [sic] fired by the thought that we would be able to participate in something bigger than ourselves that would allow us to translate into action some of the things we had been hearing about and seeing in books." Covello and his teachers paid a great deal of attention to the rank-and-file students, particularly those with behavioral and attendance problems, to such an extent that several student leaders complained to Covello: "Attention has been given only to the delinquent students. The normal student and the student who is slightly above normal are almost completely neglected." This criticism exaggerated the situation, but Covello and his staff did make a considerable effort to help troubled youngsters. For example, the teachers held meetings with the parents of students who failed two or more subjects in a marking term. Covello and two or three Spanish- and Italian-speaking teachers reserved every Wednesday evening, 8:00 to 10:00, to meet with parents who could not come in for interviews during the school day. An informant told Robert Peebles in 1965 that Covello "was always concerned when students dropped out. He would personally interview the student and then find the means for the boy to continue, whether this be social, economic, psychological, or otherwise. I was fascinated by the efforts of Dr. Covello with one boy in particular who was graduated at the age of 20 or thereabouts. I am sure that but for Dr. Covello, this boy would not have completed more than two years of high school." As noted previously, the Old Friendship Club provided counseling and employment assistance to dropouts. The guidance and placement service was "an intensely crowded office," which in 1937–38 reported interviews with three hundred potential dropouts, job placement for seventy dropouts, and part-time placement for 402 currently registered pupils. Covello organized a Student Aid Fund, based on a program he had created at DeWitt Clinton High School in the 1920s, which provided eyeglasses, shoes, clothing, and medical assistance to needy Franklin students. "With the winter approaching the problem of student aid becomes a very pressing one," Covello told his faculty. "We know that you doubtless have other responsibilities but we feel that our boys need help so badly that we must appeal to you. We have very little on hand, yet the number of boys who need help is increasing daily. Money is spent only for the most needy and only after the cases have been thoroughly investigated. To cover the cost of such things as clothing, shoes, glasses, etc. we need about $35.00 a month."
Funding sources for the Student Aid Fund included PTF card parties, Italian feste, and contributions from faculty and students. In the fall of 1939, the fund disbursed $387.35 for items ranging from shoes (sixty-four pairs) to underwear (eleven suits). That term the high school's Social Welfare Office, which housed the Student Aid Fund, provided free lunches for 362 boys. A neighborhood optometrist recalled Covello's work: "I was then, as now established as an optometrist on Lexington Avenue and East 106th Street, a stone's throw from the school. It was here that I first got to know what Dr. Covello was doing besides teaching. He would refer his students who were too poor to take care of their visual problems to me and made sure that they were not handicapped by poor vision. Their dental and medical needs were not overlooked. He knew that a physically neglected child could not profit from the best education." Covello also worked closely with the National Youth Administration, which provided jobs to some 3,500 students in uptown senior and junior high schools. In the fall of 1939 the NYA disbursed $3,655 to boys at Benjamin Franklin High School. In 1940–41 Franklin's total NYA appropriation was $13,950. A report from May 1941 shows that 257 boys held NYA jobs at the high school, serving as teachers' assistants, clerks, and printshop workers, and Covello created an NYA "service squad" to check for student passes to leave the building and to monitor the lunchroom line. He justified these jobs as necessary to advance the community school in the face of dwindling WPA support: "Lack of funds for activities outside the prescribed routine of a senior high school and lack of additional personnel to carry out the school-community program constitute a great handicap in trying to carry forward the program at Benjamin Franklin H.S." Covello envisioned schools in polyglot immigrant communities as functioning as hubs for the delivery of education, health, social, and recreational services to all members of their constituent neighborhoods. They would be public spaces for organizing communitywide citizen action projects, such as campaigns to improve housing, educational services, health, and sanitation in the blocks and neighborhoods served by the school. Urban community schools would also be catalytic hubs for democratic participation and intergroup cooperation. "By a Community-Centered School," Covello stated, "I mean one in which there is a thorough inter-action between the school and its neighborhood in meeting needs of both the child and community. I take it for granted that all progressive minds are now committed to the idea that the school of today should be—and the school of tomorrow must be—the educational and social center of its community. We have been moving toward this newer concept ever since the subject-centered school yielded to the child-centered school in our advancing educational methods. The school, which occupies a unique and strategically important position because of its relationship to practically every home in the community, should be a guiding influence not only in the life of the child but of his family and community as well." In rhetoric that Jane Addams might have found appealing, Covello also envisioned the community-centered school as a moral force. "The responsibility of the school as an educational factor does not cease at the hour of dismissal in the afternoon; it extends far beyond the walls of the school," he declaimed. "The child does not appear from nowhere in the morning nor does he vanish into nowhere in the afternoon. He comes from, and goes back into the surging life of the community in which the streets, motion pictures, dances, gangs, social clubs, churches, settlement houses, communal codes of morals and behavior are making daily and hourly impacts upon his mind and consciousness. These impacts educate—either for good or for bad. It is one of the primary duties of the school to see that the constructive forces in the community are drawn solidly together in support of educational programs for the development of the child and in behalf of a more wholesome community life" (original emphasis). This analysis, of course, begs the question: How did Covello define and use the term "community"? Was it more than simply a rhetorical device? What, realistically, is the school's area of effective community service? Ever the reflective practitioner, Covello wrestled with the implications of the term, always eschewing casual usage, as evidenced by an intriguing passage from a remnant manuscript:

When we first began to project the school-community program, we found it necessary to formulate a definite opinion as to what really constituted "the community," as far as the school and our work was concerned. We leaned somewhat to the idea of the "broad community," with the East Harlem-Yorkville Community as a sort of island to be explored in a wide expanse of interests and problems. This meant that we were undertaking to reach an area 200 city blocks long and eight city blocks wide. Within this space, about 400,000 persons are living. Below 96th Street, the population is mostly German and Slavic. Above 96th street, more than thirty different racial strains are represented in the congested population. Scarcely realizing the magnitude of the task of education in relation to an area so large and diverse in its population and interests, a base sociological map was made of the entire East Harlem-Yorkville territory with an idea that this was our sphere of action.

At the end of the first six-months [sic], it was decided that we would do well to concentrate on East Harlem alone, with its 200,000 and more people. Later still, we were talking in terms of "the neighborhood"
meaning by that term, the area immediately contiguous to the school. Later still we were thinking in terms of the "social block," and were convinced that we should have rendered a valuable service to the larger community if our school could work out a satisfactory, rounded program that would meet the needs of even the 2,000 and more people living in the "social block" of which the Benjamin Franklin High School is a part.

By degrees, as our program began actually to evolve, the wisdom of making the social block the basis of community-centered education became apparent. By a block to block progression, any community, of any size whatsoever, may eventually be reached. We projected, therefore, the "street unit" program of the Benjamin Franklin High School. 183

Here Covello used the term "community" "in a descriptive sense," much as "sociologists engaged in community studies... use the term to mean something like 'small town' or neighborhood." As philosopher Iris Marion Young observes, the term can also be understood as "a normative model of ideal social organization." It is this idealized, normative sense of community that emerges in other writings and in the structures, roles, and programs that Covello built for the high school; community thus understood, to borrow Young's apt phrase, is "the concept of social relations that embody openness to unassimilated otherness with justice and appreciation.184"

Consistent with this understanding of community, the "community-centered school" rested upon a view of education as inherently a civic function. Covello began with the premise that education signified "a leading forth, from within, of latent abilities, and of a process of guiding such abilities" (original emphasis). The kind and quality of this dual development, he implied, would have significant repercussions for both community and national life. Covello argued that education must "broaden the child's intellectual grasp and the horizon of his mind," while building disciplined study habits, as well as logical and coherent thinking. In addition, education should enable a student not simply to tap current knowledge, but also to begin "branching out along lines that are original and constructively valuable; [education] must encourage initiative in discerning and deciding problems of practical importance in relation to the life lie is to live." Yet education does not stop there, as its twofold nature carries its influence into the wider community. The child's status as tomorrow's adult citizen implies education's socially constructive role, as schools should "sense in the growing child, the citizen of to-morrow." It is upon that future adult citizen, insisted Covello, that "both his small community and the nation must depend for intelligent contributions to civic progress, for the nation is but the sum total of its small communities, and the communities themselves are but the sum total of homes from which school children come." 185

Covello saw no inherent conflict between these two aspects of education—on the contrary, they served to enhance each other. The community-centered school built on academic education and broadened it considerably on the basis of "knowledge of, and experience in, the community." 186 Centering the school on the local community, he argued, advanced traditional academic goals by investing academic work with an immediate relevance and "attaching a sense of importance to the individual himself as well as to his education for a larger responsibility... [This] sense of reality and of unity with large aims, and important activities provides the best incentive for the student, particularly the high school student. Moreover, community centered education develops ability as well as interest and prepares for democratic participation in community life." The underlying cause of school failure, in Covello's judgment, was the lack of "programs through which interest can be developed." 187

Not only did Benjamin Franklin staff members understand community-centered education as a leading forth of the individual into civic participation, but also they viewed the community as exercising a broad set of educational influences on the individual. Contrary to the assumptions of "the traditional type of academic isolation,... the school child does not live in a social vacuum;... his educational process involves not only the home and the school but the total community." This general condition required that the school establish "an 'education for social living' as a process in which the child in the school must be considered in relation to his entire background, i.e., his home, his groups, and his community." 188

The community that Benjamin Franklin engaged suffered from an impoverishment of social capital (our term for Covello's meaning), a "general problem of maladjustment," a broadly felt resentment, and a creeping indifference—factors that imposed a "weight upon the progress of the community." 189 Covello assigned great importance to community-centered schooling as a catalyst for local democratic development, applying a "galvanizing stimulus" to counteract the negative social forces that produced such alienation and despair. In order for the local public school to perform that role, it "must find its way back to active and intimate identification with the daily life of its community." 190 Inspired by the examples of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, Covello insisted that the way to educate young people for effective citizenship was to involve them in solving real problems in the local community. His yardstick was Lincoln's civic education. 191

At a time when books were difficult to obtain, the adolescent Lincoln not only read and studied but also participated fully "in the life and tasks of the community." The wilderness did not allow a theoretical democracy; citizenship meant knowing what the community needed and shouldering one's fair share of the work. Young Lincoln, a sixteen-year-old boy, "was expected to measure up to the demands of the situation the same as the older members of the community. In other words, there was a complete integration of the educational
process with the practical life of the community.” This may explain, Covello noted, the quality of many leaders during that period, and why “men with aptitude for leadership were able to measure up to their times and to make great contributions to democracy and to the world, after having first made their contributions to the smaller communities to which each belonged.”

By cultivating such a problem-solving orientation and relationship, Covello wrote, the community-centered school could fulfill its central role as a local public institution dedicated to the democratic development of the community. Specifically, the school must operate as a “socializing agency in intercultural relationships and the expansion of the local social world; in the development of community-consciousness and communal cooperative effort”; and as “a testing ground for leadership ability within the school, and for training community leadership.”

Covello portrayed the community-centered school, in all its interactions, as a microcosm of U.S. democracy, contending that it transcended parochialism, its immediate focus on local issues and concerns notwithstanding. “If human relationships are to be developed on the basis of civic responsibility, they ought to embrace the entire community of East Harlem, then the city, then the state, then the nation, and should probably include the world,” he wrote. "But a start has to be made somewhere. In East Harlem there is sufficient justification in emphasizing the need for the people to become aware of the common ties of the local community, the need, so to speak, for sensing the community of interests within the boundaries of East Harlem. The point of view is admittedly a narrow one, but it has the advantage of permitting concrete exemplification of a basic democratic principle, with the possibility of launching programs that, though limited in scope (in a geographical sense) carry the elements of enterprises that are valid for larger human aggregates. Simply stated, a developing social consciousness within the limits of East Harlem contains on a small scale all the aspects of democratic life in larger social groups, and is therefore conducive to becoming expanded.”

To achieve its goals, the school needed to recognize that it was part of the community being educated, a “part of the general educational process.” Benjamin Franklin’s staff would also have to show the East Harlem community concrete results, “not lip service but genuine help to the community.” That friendship would include helping to counter the low self-esteem that many East Harlem residents felt—a feeling reinforced by negative media stereotypes of the district. No one understood this more clearly than Benjamin Franklin students. In an article describing the community-centered approach at the high school, three students expressed youthful optimism that the school’s community programs would revitalize East Harlem by addressing its “defeatism,” by providing “a feeling of hope and pride.” “Then they would no longer be obsessed with the idea that a community such as East Harlem offers absolutely no means for advancement in the world. For the old, worn-out philosophy of defeatism would give way to a new feeling of optimism and a will to take an active part in improving their conditions.”

Democratic development would mean the education and mobilization of diverse cultural groups around shared political goals, creating new networks of social capital. The cumulative successes of cooperative planning across ethnic, racial, and class boundaries would, in theory at least, contribute to greater tolerance and respect of cultural differences. In this way civic empowerment would be entwined with broadly based community building in East Harlem. In his salutatory address for the spring commencement of 1938, senior Salvatore Canino recounted: “Throughout our high school career we have been taught our science, our mathematics, history, French, economics and other truly useful subjects—but we are leaving Franklin with a far better education, a far better training than the knowledge of these subjects gives us as a result of our extra-curricular activities in the community. From these activities we have learned the importance of cooperation in the solution of such pressing problems in our community as housing, illiteracy, and racial prejudice.”

Covello cast the community-centered school in many roles: as social center, as stimulus for communal action, as research agency, as guardian of the prestige of the community, to name but a few. Covello underscored the centrality of the research role (“the school as explorer”), which he described as “the indispensable factor” in the success of its other functions. Knowledge of the community, “a comprehension by the faculty of the total community situation,” was the driving engine.

Benjamin Franklin’s Teachers

Community-centered schooling in East Harlem required teachers who subscribed to Covello’s philosophy and supported his community agenda. Covello was able to build an inner circle of committed activists of this ilk. Yet he regarded community as a professional obligation of all teachers.

The New York City schools of the 1930s were a megabureaucracy whose managers expected city teachers to be all things to all children. City teachers were socialized in both their teacher training and professional practice to be social workers, to attend scrupulously to the physical and mental health needs of their pupils, and to work extended hours without wage compensation. Their work conditions, however, undercut the board of education’s goal to “supplement the home.” Most city teachers were already overburdened by overcrowded classrooms, unremunerated extracurricular assignments, and mountains of paperwork: “forms, reports, censuses, surveys, grading, tests, and scores to far greater degree than teachers elsewhere.” To understake the point extravagantly, teachers had “a very long day.”
Viewed from this perspective, the internal contradictions of the board of education—sponsored Activity Program appear in full relief. The board wanted to fuse child-centered education onto social efficiency schooling, and to do that it imposed an additional burden at a point where teachers badly needed relief from the minutiae of their professional lives. Absent citywide systemic reform—realigned priorities and adequate support structures for progressive education—teachers inevitably downgraded or co-opted the reform. At the high school level this “grammar of schooling” was even more entrenched by virtue of departmentalization, Regents’ examinations, and work-entry and college-entrance requirements.

Educational economies during the 1930s affected all New York City schools and teachers, Benjamin Franklin being no exception. On 1 January 1933, the state legislature authorized what amounted to an average reduction of 6.5 percent of all salaries in the city schools; the following year the total salary budget was cut by another 10 percent. The sixteen salary scales on which these reductions were apparently based ranged from $2,145 (level 1) to $4,500 (level 16). Teachers were doubly burdened—their class sizes increased as new teacher hires did not keep pace with burgeoning enrollments. In the high schools 1932–33 was a particularly stressful year, with an increase of some eighteen thousand students that was matched by a net gain of only 323 teachers. Unfortunately, we do not know what, if any, effects beleaguered district finances had on hiring or retention of regular teachers at Benjamin Franklin from the fall of 1934, when the high school opened, to July of 1937, when the salary schedules were reinstated.

Educational historians have noted the high quality of New York City teachers in the 1930s, a few even hailing it as the city’s “Golden Age” of education. In the first in-depth treatment of the subject, Ruth Markowitz attributes this efflorescence in no small part to the entry of highly educated female Jewish teachers into the city schools—by 1930, 40 percent of entering teachers were Jewish women; by 1940, 56 percent. Graduates of the liberal hothouses Hunter and Brooklyn colleges, many of these teachers were dedicated activists, either by virtue of their immigrant family’s participation in eastern European socialist or labor movements, or their exposure to the Depression era’s “unemployment, marches, picketing, breadlines, evictions, and labor strife.” Fearing for their jobs, however, in many cases these teachers were constrained from enacting their social critiques in city schools by bureaucrats who were punitively hostile to such agendas.

In various ways Benjamin Franklin was a rare exception to the “real-school” script in the New York City Schools. Primarily through the agency of the Community Advisory Council, the community high school offered a select group of teachers a school-based venue and encouragement for their social activism. Throughout his twenty-two-year tenure as Franklin’s principal, Covello was blessed with a core of exceptional teachers who shared his dedication to young people and his vision for community building and social justice in East Harlem. Five of these teachers—Abraham Kroll and Morris Deschel in science, Michael DeCessare in economics, Annita Giacobbe in Italian, and Harry Levene in math—were among the seventeen transfereses who joined Covello from DeWitt Clinton. Kroll served as Covello’s assistant principal, and Deschel was the “teacher in charge” of the high school’s Yorkville annex; Giacobbe had helped Covello with the struggle to win parity for Italian in the 1920s and with the Boys’ Club Study. The Clinton expatriates were the first of a line of distinguished teachers who would make distinctive contributions to community-centered schooling in East Harlem. These teachers, whose nonremunerating school-community work is documented in the next several chapters of this book, made extraordinary sacrifices on behalf of the community school, working late into the night at the high school side by side with Covello; chairing CAC school-community committees; leading community campaigns for better housing, health, schooling, and citizenship; supervising school clubs and special programs; and serving as foreign-language translators for the school and community and as public speakers to explain the school’s program to community organizations.

This is not to suggest that all Franklin teachers adhered to the high standard of public service set by Covello and his hardy band of committed activists. “Many of our teachers have entered generously into the work of the school and community,” Covello noted in a five-year report on the progress of the high school to Benjamin Franklin faculty and staff, written in September 1939. This report suggests (elliptically, given its generally positive tone) that he was not yet satisfied with the level of teacher participation. After announcing that a Facuity School-Community Committee had been formed “for the purpose of working out plans for greater participation on the part of our teachers in the community program,” he adjured all his teachers to “realize there is a pressing need to make more and better contacts with the community in which we are working. . . . We cannot really do satisfactory professional work if we continue to ignore the community.” Put differently, community work is integral to professional work.

Though documentation is lacking, we surmise that some teachers resisted this calculus, regarding community work as just another “pressing need” to complicate their already intensified work lives. The problem of Franklin teachers’ “greater participation” in the community program may also have been an issue of teacher professionalism. Many teachers would increasingly distance themselves from the social-worker role; they would define their professional role as classroom teaching and, in the second half of the twentieth century, specify their expectations for that role in the legal-bureaucratic language of union contracts. Given Covello’s expectations for teachers’ community involvement, it is not difficult to imagine a Franklin teacher saying, “I’m a mathematics teacher, not a social worker.”
To summarize thus far, by the end of the 1930s, as Covello worked on a plan to move Benjamin Franklin to a new building above East River Drive, a thriving community school operation, coordinated by the CAC, guided by a core of dedicated teachers, and bolstered by street units and WPA educational resources, was in place—although the future was uncertain, given the instability of WPA programs and the gathering storm in Europe. During Franklin's pre-World War II halcyon years, the committees of the CAC had begun to coordinate educational resources within East Harlem's existing social networks, the East Harlem Council of Social Agencies, for instance, and to fuse them into a set of programs and citizen-action projects that would contribute to bringing important new resources to the district and building and strengthening social capital in the wider community. As we learned, the making of Benjamin Franklin was always a hard-fought, terribly difficult struggle, especially when it concerned winning students and parents to the school's academic goals; poor academic performance and a high dropout rate were continuing problems.

And yet for all the attendant problems, something bold, adventurous, and visionary, without parallel in the history of American urban education, was unfolding in this East Harlem high school in the late Depression era. We turn now to consider a critical aspect of Covello's project, the high school's curricular strategy to educate East Harlemites for "cultural democracy," the most prominent element of which was an intercultural education program that Covello organized with Rachel Davis DuBois of the Service Bureau for Education in Human Relations.

RESPECTED PUBLIC SERVANT Edward Corsi, commissioner of immigration at Ellis Island under President Hoover, described the East Harlem he knew in the decade prior to the founding of Benjamin Franklin as a profoundly international corner of a great cosmopolitan metropolis: "Perhaps in few other spots throughout the world are so many races to be found in so small an area. The life in many parts of the Old World is re-enacted here. Were it not for the 'flappers' and the 'cake eaters' of the younger generation, 'Americans' to the core, the illusion would be complete."

East Harlem's shifting mix of ethnic and racial groups provided a rich context and constant challenge for community-centered schooling. "At Benjamin Franklin High School," noted Covello, "we have known for some time that some of the major problems of the school are connected with the need for establishing tolerance and friendly relationships among the differing groups of students in our school." Influenced by both local and nonlocal developments, including community coordinating councils, diverse traditions of social research, and national discussions of social reconstruction and intercultural relations, Covello and his staff attempted to deal institutionally with this challenge through an effort that revealed a complex interplay of goals and underlying tensions in the school's mission—the desire to respect pluralism versus the need for common values, the school's democratic aims versus the reality of ethnic divisions in East Harlem, and the school's curricular goals versus a community studies approach. Despite these tensions Benjamin Franklin's leaders developed an evolving vision of cultural democracy that addressed community problems as educational challenges broadly understood. To clarify and