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PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE TEACHERS' CONFERENCE

IN THE progress of the years, institutions need to be reevaluated, often re-directed. Times change, and the conditions that bring an institution into existence soften, or pass away. Generations of men come and go, and new leaders miss something of the challenge that prompted their predecessors. Other forces become organized, institutionalized, assume responsibility for the task in hand. The older institution becomes a form, loses some of its vitality, coasts on the laurels of an earlier period. Thus, it behooves each generation to stop and reevaluate the institutions of its inheritance, and when occasion demands to redirect their energies.

The Teachers' Conference as used in New York state is a case in point. One needs but to attend a dozen conferences to realize that they have their roots in the older teachers' institutes. Many an ancient meaning lies hidden under modern terminology. Of course, as will be pointed out, the conference is a varied thing. Being primarily a local institution it takes on the color of the local leadership. But to understand it, one must see its origins, make the acquaintance of its ancestry.

It is generally conceded that County Superintendent Jacob Smith Denman held the first teachers' institute in this state at Ithaca beginning April 4, 1843. It lasted two weeks, and had three instructors beside the superintendent. Four years later, institutes were placed under state control, and state

aid, "not exceeding sixty dollars annually," was granted to each county holding an institute. Ten years later, 1857, this state aid was increased to one hundred twenty dollars a county.¹

If one may judge from the documents left us by the leaders of this earlier day, there was little doubt as to the purpose or function of these institutes. Under the stimulus of Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and other leaders of less enduring fame, the need was keenly felt for teachers with special preparation for their work. The fact was generally recognized that most teachers could not secure professional preparation for their work before entering teaching; the institutes were designed to meet the needs of those who were obliged to begin teaching without preparation. Needless to say that in most communities this latter group constituted all or nearly all of the entire staff.

That teachers felt the need for the help given by the institute is evinced in the following from Finegan's report: "Twenty-eight teachers attended the Ithaca institute for the full two weeks. The cost was about ten dollars a teacher, and this at a time when the average salary paid teachers was fifteen dollars a month for men and seven dollars for women. Such earnestness and self-sacrifice in developing a great profession ought not to be forgotten."

"Such earnestness and self sacrifice" on the part of teachers is not to be wondered at when we find that Superintendent Denman walked nearly two thousand miles the following year in visiting schools and addressing groups of people in the interest of

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¹For excellent historical account of Teacher Institutes in New York see Thomas E. Finegan, *Teacher Training Agencies*, Ch. 6, pp. 285-311, University of the State of New York, Education Department, Annual Report. Vol. 2, 1915.

education. Evidently the institute, potent as it was, was but a cog in his machine for promoting better common school education in his country.

These quotations from older documents throw into relief the purposes of the earlier institutes:

An institute, in the sense now used, is a voluntary association of common school teachers, assembled for mutual improvement in a knowledge of the sciences and the art of teaching them with greater ability.

The normal² school furnishes the best possible opportunity to those who can enjoy its advantages, but the great body of teachers, if improved, must resort to other means. The institute is, therefore, designed to meet this very case and give every teacher an opportunity to enjoy such advantages as it affords.

By these means pedagogical jealousies are removed, a community of interests formed, the qualifications of teachers more and more improved, popular sentiment enlisted on the side of primary schools, uniformity of governing and instructing children, according to the most successful methods, adopted; the experience of each, becoming common stock for the benefit of all, the enlargement of acquaintance and the contracting of friendships, mind, coming in contact with mind, in the various exercises, awakening and invigorating the intellectual energies, and finally, by improvements in personal deportment and general urbanity of manners, etc.³

There was a certain ebb and flow in the influence of the teachers' institutes upon the educational welfare of the state; but looking back over the course of the years, it seems to have weathered the periods of depression and to have made a rather steady gain in the esteem of the state until the beginning of the present century. The following summary⁴ of the milestones in its career are of interest to those who associate with its lineal descendant.

- 1843—First Institute held
- 1847—Institutes placed under state control
First state aid: \$60 to each county holding an institute
- 1857—Amount increased to \$120 a county
- 1860—Amount made \$8,000 for the whole state
- 1867—Amount increased to \$15,000

²Salem Town. Letter, Dec. 15, 1849, to Hon. Christopher Morgan, Sec. of State, and Supt. of Common Schools, quoted by Finegan, *ibid.*, pp. 290-295.

³Salem Town. Letter, Jan., 1845, to Hon. Samuel Young, Superintendent of Common Schools, quoted by Finegan, pp. 286-289.

⁴Thomas E. Finegan, *Teacher Training Agencies*, pp. 309-310.

- 1872—Amount increased to \$18,000
- 1889—Amount increased to \$25,000
- 1892—Amount increased to \$30,000
- 1895—Amount increased to \$35,000
- 1899—Amount increased to \$40,000
- 1862—Local authorities allowed to pay the teachers their regular salaries while they were in attendance upon an institute.
- 1881—A regular corps of institute conductors appointed.
- 1885—The attendance of teachers at institutes made compulsory and school affairs were compelled to pay the salaries of teachers while at the institute.
- 1888—County institutes changed to school commissioner district institutes.
- 1890—Union school districts having a population of 5,000 inhabitants or more, who employed a superintendent who devoted all his time to supervision, were excused from compulsory closing of their schools during the session of an institute in the district.
- 1892—Bureau of institutes and training classes organized.
- 1895—Graded or sectional institutes established.
- 1896—City institutes organized when asked for by local authorities.
State summer institutes established.
- 1898—Training classes separated from institutes making two distinct bureaus.
- 1911—Institutes abolished.

The later years of the teachers' institute are familiar to all who served in New York schools during the first decade of the present century. But the reasons for its passing and some of its influences that survived it are pertinent to any clear understanding of the present teachers' conference.

Among the defects of the earlier institute as enumerated by Finegan were,—⁵

- (a) The "temptation to secure speakers solely because of their power to entertain an audience upon popular questions."
- (b) The employment of many local speakers "who had no message for anyone."
- (c) The popularity of "elocutionists."
- (d) The use of speakers who had books or other things to sell.
- (e) The employment of persons who believed "their appearance at institutes would further some cause or interest in which they were concerned."

- (f) The refusal of teachers to attend sessions which did not interest them.

To obviate the foregoing defects, it was

⁵Thomas E. Finegan, *Teacher Training Agencies*, pp. 309-310.

not surprising that the state should employ a regular corps of institute conductors in 1881 and make attendance of teachers compulsory in 1885, or that in 1887 State Superintendent, Andrew S. Draper, should suggest the following modifications:

1. Change from county to district institutes.
2. Insist that every school in the district be closed while an institute is in session.
3. Have the institute program made in advance and distributed to the teachers of the district.
4. Get the best possible instructors and make use of the leading local teachers.
5. Bring the normal school faculties into active cooperation with the institute work.
6. Hold but one institute a week in each district, and arrange the dates so that the institute shall interfere as little as possible with the work of the advanced schools.

Just what should take the place of the institutes was not altogether foreseen or predetermined. The only thing certain apparently was that the institute had outlived its usefulness.⁶ "When progression ceases, deterioration sets in. The institutes seem to have reached the limit of their efficiency and the time is ripe to take a step forward in the matter of helping and stimulating teachers. Just what is the wisest thing to do can not be fully foretold. The way must be carefully felt but that it will work out satisfactorily is not doubted."

It was evident that Draper expected the district superintendents to assume the responsibility for the phase of professional leadership that had been exercised by the institute conductors, and to assume a leadership similar to that exercised by city superintendents. The following represents his most constructive statement on the question,—⁷

The teachers' institutes have been discontinued. They were good in their day, but their day is past. The teachers are at the very beginning more thoroughly trained than they used to be. They do not need so much lecturing and stimulating as they did before the uniform examinations were established and the literature and other helps for teachers were so prolific. What they do need is frequent conference with the superintendent and among themselves. You are to arrange such conferences. They may be by neighborhoods, or towns, or two towns. They should

of course be in a perfectly healthy environment where all may be glad to go. They should be for a territory which will enable all to come in the morning and return at night. A good nutritious dinner at reasonable expense should be arranged. Then there should be a live conference on the everyday interests of the school. Something of the success of these conferences will depend upon the settings of the room you meet in. It would be better to sit around a table where each may look all the others in the face, than in a stiffly arranged schoolroom or church. You will have to have plenty of good, live material for these conferences. You will know where to get these materials. But give the teachers every opportunity to tell their troubles and ask their questions. Having done that, confer about the schoolhouse and ground, and about the school library and the appliances and apparatus. Confer about the work in general and about the adaptations to particular localities and individuals. Confer about what the teachers are doing for self-improvement. *Confer, I say; do not lecture.* Do not do it in a stilted way but in an easy, familiar way, so that all may have an inclination to enter into the matter, and may go home in the end with the feeling that it was worth while to attend. Let the gathering be *small* enough for a conference, and insist that it shall be a conference. Avoid formal or heavy papers. You will not need stenographers. Keep agents out. They may have their place, but it is not there. Do not expect some one from the State Department; carry forward these conferences on your own account. Do not wind them up with a dance. Act freely and hold them often. In a word, establish relations with the teachers in your district similar to those which exist between an efficient superintendent and the teachers in a city or village. Begin to assume that the everlasting country school problem is really solved.⁸

That the state proposed to safeguard the "conference" from the evils that had attended the older institutes is apparent from a reading of the statute by which it was organized.⁹

To assemble all the teachers of his district by towns or otherwise, for the purpose of conference on the course of study, for reports of and advice and counsel in relation to discipline, school management and other school work, and for promoting the general good of all the schools of the district. Teachers shall be entitled to compensation for days actually in attendance upon such conference.

In the beginning, it was agreed that schools might be dismissed and that teachers might receive compensation not to exceed

⁶Andrew S. Draper, Annual Report, State Education Department, 1912.

⁷Teachers Conference, Finegan, *Teacher Training Agencies*, p. 312.

⁸Andrew S. Draper, "What is expected of District Superintendents?"—Address given before the rural section of the New York State Teachers Association, November 28, 1911.

⁹New York Education Law, 1926, p. 152, Sec. 395, Par. 2.

six days each school year. In 1921, a common understanding was reached between the State Education Department on the one hand and the Governor and the Legislature on the other, that, except in most unusual cases, the Department would not grant compensation for attendance at conferences to exceed three days each school year.

Since many of the district superintendents had been school commissioners and all had attended the older institutes, and since several of the more popular institute conductors and their temporary assistants remained in the Education Department, it was but natural that the superintendents should ignore Draper's advice,—“Do not expect some one from the State Department; carry forward these conferences on your own account.” Nor is it surprising that the Department finds itself represented on nearly every conference program.

Gradually the smaller group conference as implied in the statute has won its way until during the year 1926, 224 group or town conferences were held as compared with 217 general teachers conferences. For the preceding year these figures were respectively 216 and 211. It is this general conference that follows more closely the spirit and form of the older institutes.

An examination of a random selection of 20 printed programs for conferences held during the school year 1925-1926 showed that seven were called for one day, ten for two days, two for three, and one for five days. Seven of the twenty were for one supervisory district only; the remaining thirteen represented two or more supervisory districts. Some indicated a high degree of organization to provide for the needs of different groups and to attain certain well defined objectives. Others were conspicuous for the “Address” unnamed, for giving the same forensic diet to all teachers, and for a sort of heterogeneous, pedagogical, vaudeville performance designed to get nothing in particular, but presum-

ably built with the hope that something of inspiration or good would result from it.

For the regional conferences of district superintendents held during the winter 1926-1927, it was proposed to devote an hour to a round table discussion of the teacher conference and its usefulness in a program of professional leadership. A little more than 15 years had elapsed since Draper directed the superintendents assembled in Albany as to the use they should make of the conference. During these fifteen years the conference had been exposed to the influence of a great variety of local leadership; and all superintendents participating in the discussion had a rich background of experience for considering the questions involved.

That the teachers' conference is still a dominant factor in the professional program of the district superintendents and that it is potentially a power for greater good than it has yet proved is not to be doubted by those who listened to the discussion engaged in by the superintendents in the five regional meetings. At the close of these discussions the writer compiled the following summary. He found that his own ideas of the conference as a means of leadership in New York schools had been considerably modified, and in submitting the following summary he realizes that he is not expressing in every detail the thought of all district superintendents. What follows, though, he believes to be a fairly accurate statement of the consensus of the opinion of superintendents as to the place the conference should occupy in their supervisory program.

1. *More than one type of conference is needed.*

a. The reorganization of the State Teachers' Association makes it possible for every teacher in the supervisory districts of the state to attend a two day session of a zone meeting. Since these zone meeting programs are better financed than the teacher conference, and can thereby employ better and a

greater variety of talent, the supervisory districts may well turn to these meetings for the major part of their inspirational program.

b. Certain aspects of the older "Teacher Institutes" have survived and should be continued. The county is a convenient subdivision of the state. The district superintendents have a certain official relationship to the county board of supervisors and often have their offices at the county seat. Since the schools are somewhat related to the other county governmental agencies it is a good thing for teachers, once a year, to come together for consideration of the educational problems of the county. Since the county usually has several high schools, such a meeting gives opportunity for several teachers having the same type of work to meet together for discussion. Then too, it is a good thing for teachers of different grades, different subjects, and different schools to meet together for consideration of problems of common concern. This last argument applies to conferences of one supervisory district or of a group of supervisory districts quite as readily as to the county conference.

c. The best type of conference is that where a small group of teachers—usually not more than forty or fifty—meet together to consider one or more specific problems of immediate concern to all participating.

2. *As a rule, the program should aim at some major objective, i. e., should be built around some central theme.*

a. Programs aiming at subsidiary objectives should be built in harmony with and as a re-enforcement to the attainment of the main objective.

b. If it is necessary to utilize the conference to attain two or more objectives of equal importance, the corresponding programs should be distinct and separated by a recess or other intermission.

c. All speakers should be selected because of their ability to contribute to teach-

ers' understanding of the major objective or some particular phase of it.

d. Leaders of conference groups should be chosen not only because of their knowledge of the subject, but also because of their ability to stimulate discussion on the part of teachers.

e. The pedagogical vaudeville performance has no place in the teachers' conference—every item on the program should contribute to teachers' working knowledge of the central theme of the conference.

3. *The small group meeting together because of their common interest in a specific problem is the best unit of organization for conference purposes.*

a. Such a group may constitute a conference in itself; or it may be one of several units of a larger conference.

b. It should be small enough so that practically all members may have opportunity for self-expression.

c. The leader should be selected because of his knowledge of the subject and ability to stimulate discussion.

d. It should be organized on "the round table" basis. Teachers should not be seated in "goose step," "military row" formation; but rather so each one speaking may look all others in the eye.

4. *Speakers should be placed on the conference program only when they satisfy one or more of the following criteria.*

a. Stimulate teachers to better professional activity along the lines which the conference was organized to promote—contribute to the teachers' working knowledge of the objective sought.

b. Broaden or enrich teachers' cultural outlook on life.

c. Broaden or enrich teachers' general professional outlook.

5. *The "demonstration" should be utilized wherever possible in building the conference program, especially to reenforce all considerations of method.*

a. It should be preceded by a group dis-

cussion of the ideas to be demonstrated, and followed by group discussion of the extent to which the objectives of the demonstration were attained.

6. *The business meeting should be brief, devoted to specific ends, and organized according to the needs of teachers.*

a. To have high school teachers listen to instructions designed only for one room rural teachers, or to require experienced teachers to listen year after year to instructions for beginners is a waste of their time and an insult to their intelligence.

7. *The conference should provide for stimulation and satisfaction of teachers' social attitudes.*

a. The social attitudes of teachers constitute quite as important a factor in their success as does their professional knowledge.

b. The conference may well promote social activities that teachers can reproduce in their own local communities.

8. *The superintendent's responsibility for the conference.*

a. He should utilize the best talent of his teachers in building the program, in arranging demonstrations, in appointing leaders of discussion groups, and in appointing committees responsible for the success of the meeting.

b. He alone or through co-operation with members of his staff should determine what the objectives of the conference shall be.

c. He should make certain that all speakers or discussion leaders will contribute toward the objective sought.

d. He should build the conference program as a connecting link in his supervisory program.

Perhaps certain negative conclusions ought not to be omitted from this record. In view of increased transportation facilities and the contribution of the zone meetings of the State Teachers' Association, there is no longer any reasonable justification

for devoting three, four or five days each year to a *general* teachers' conference. There should be no place in New York schools for a program of unrelated talks or addresses aiming at nothing in particular. The "inspirational" type of conference has been sadly overworked; too often, it gives neither inspiration nor help; and appealing primarily to the emotions satisfies teachers while they are listening but makes no impression on their work afterward. The "nameless address" listed on a printed program is often a subtle acknowledgement of the superintendents' indifference as to the outcome of his program.

Out of these regional discussions has grown a better realization of the spirit of the teachers' conference, provided for in the Education Law, Section 395, a better understanding of the value of the small group of teachers from similar positions conferring on problems of mutual interest. There has come the common agreement that every conference must be measured by the influence it has upon the services rendered by teachers. Only the superintendent is in position to make certain that the purposes of the conference are realized in the work of the schools. The conference has value only in so far as the superintendent makes it an integral part of his supervisory program.

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Correction of all defects of eyes, ears, nose, and teeth of school children is reported by a number of districts in Virginia as the result of community efforts to arouse greater general interest in the physical well-being of children in the schools. Many districts and individual schools in other States report 100 per cent correction of dental defects, and at least one junior high school has gone so far as to demand a certificate of sound or repaired teeth as a requisite to graduation.