

Community Efforts to Improve Schools in Arlington County, Virginia

By the Research Committee, Arlington Historical Society

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Two documents added to the Society's files during the past year together shed some light on efforts over a period of two decades to improve the schools of Arlington County. Excerpts from these two accounts are given below in synoptic form.*

"History of County PTA Council, Arlington, Virginia, 1931-49," compiled by Belva Margaret Owens, published (mimeo) 1949; includes a list of officers of the Council, 1931-32 through 1949-50.

The records of the early years of the Council (1931-41) have been lost. The history of this period has been reconstructed mainly from the memories of those active in the Council.

In the Fall of 1930, a movement to organize a federation of School Leagues, Civic Leagues, Mothers' Clubs, Parents' Clubs, and PTA's for the purpose of working for a bond issue* for school improvement culminated in the organization of the County Council of PTA's on February 9, 1931.

During the early years, according to this account, much effort was spent in problems of organization and strengthening the local PTA's, but in 1933-34 the Council supported a legislative program covering (1) full 9-month sessions for all children in Virginia; (2) a minimum teacher's salary of \$720 per annum; and (3) free textbooks for all children. A delegation from the Council went to Richmond to work for this program.

In 1934-35, the Council took pride in the fact that it had been responsible for getting a ruling that children should be near their 6th birthday before they could enter school. Previously, a child could enter school as soon as he was in his 6th year with the result that many 5-year-olds were in school. The Council also succeeded in getting a ruling that children must attend the school in their district rather than be allowed to move about if they decided that they did not like the teacher.

By 1936-37, only three of the 16 white schools in the County had not joined the Council. Pressure was brought on the County Board to devote

*EDITOR'S NOTE: *A "Report on the School Building Needs and School Finances of Arlington County, Virginia" prepared by the U.S. Bureau of Education at the request of the County School Board and made public early in 1930 (copy in the Society's files) recommended a construction program totaling \$355,000. It proposed a bond issue of \$580,000 to include consolidation of outstanding short-term loans. It presented data showing that Arlington ranked 24th out of 28 cities of comparable size and situation in ADA per pupil expenditures, 7th in estimated real value of taxable property per capita of population, and 1st in amount of estimated real wealth back of each dollar spent on schools for current expense. Undoubtedly, this Report lay behind the move to support a bond issue. The fate of the issue does not appear in this record.*

more funds for school buildings and operation, especially for the junior high school. In the Fall of 1936, the Thomas Nelson Page PTA enlisted the aid of the Council in securing some type of training for the handicapped children of the County. The result was the beginning of home training for these children.

With a budget of \$34 for the 1937-38 school year, the Council undertook a program designed to create wide interest in, and better understanding of, the school program in Arlington, and to interpret to the public the Virginia curriculum "which was then new enough to attract considerable attention." Letters were written to the State legislators from Arlington opposing a Bill under which selection of School Board members would have been delegated to the County Board. A delegate was instructed to appear before the Legislature's Committee on Schools and Colleges to say that the Council was opposed because they wished to "keep the selection of school board members out of politics."

The following year the Council aided in the organization of Safety Patrols in the schools, and spearheaded a movement for more supervised playgrounds for summer vacation similar to one that had been started the year before at Patrick Henry. By 1939, all 19 white schools in the County were joined in the Council, representing a membership of 3,785.

In 1940, the impact of the War was beginning to be felt with efforts to equip basement rooms in the schools as air-raid shelters, and the formation of a special Defense Committee to work with the School Board among the Council's activities. A special Education Committee also was established to work for increased teachers' salaries and sound retirement laws. In succeeding years, attendance at meetings was held down by gasoline rationing, and the number of meetings was curtailed by the fuel shortage. In 1942-43, strong support was given to higher teacher salaries.

Education of the public was undertaken on the operation of the Literary Fund and the "Denny" Report recommending changes in public school education in Virginia which the Council supported with the exception of the proposal for popular election of members of school boards.

By 1945-46, the number of local PTA's in the Council had grown to 26 with a membership of 8,103 parents and teachers. A special meeting was held to study the question of half-day sessions and the need for kindergartens. The Council supported a resolution of the Kate Waller Barrett PTA to petition the County Board for large enough appropriations to allow for building expansion, more teachers, full-day sessions for first and second grades, and the establishment of kindergartens. The objective for 1946-47 was "to bring about closer cooperation between parents and teachers and to help advance the school administration's long-term program for the education of our children." Specific aims were to obtain needed funds to meet the unprecedented growth of the school system, to obtain more qualified teachers, more supervision and guidance directors,

and better salaries. These objectives were furthered in every way possible. Programs were held to inform the membership on the proposed bond issues for school buildings, and on teacher salaries. The School Board was petitioned for a special hearing on the school bond issue; the Council supported the proposal for a \$3.25 million issue. The School Board was commended for setting a minimum salary of \$2,400 for an accredited teacher.

The account of 1948-49 states: "The outstanding activity of the year was support of measures for school improvement, both on local and State levels. On the local level a resolution was approved by the Council commending the Superintendent of Schools and the School Board for their thorough survey of the needs of Arlington schools and approving the requested authorization of school construction bonds in the amount of \$4,750,000. It also aided in securing the passage of the issue by helping to circulate petitions to bring it before the citizens and, later, by supporting the Coordinating Council for the Arlington School Bond Campaign. . . In the Spring of 1949, the Council passed a resolution asking locals to study the proposed school budget of \$3,065,000 and support it by writing to the County Board urging its acceptance."

The Council participated in the Nominating Conference for the selection of nonpartisan School Board candidates.*

Efforts were made by the Council to secure a special session of the General Assembly of Virginia to deal with the emergency school situation, particularly in respect to construction needs. It furthered education of the public by holding a special meeting devoted to consideration of the tax structure of Virginia and school financing.

During the period covered by this Report, the County Council of PTA's had grown from 7 charter member locals in 1931 with an estimated membership of a little over 1,000 to 30 locals with a combined membership of nearly 12,000 in 1948-49. "This history of Council achievement indicates a constant striving for the goal of better schools, and better parents and teachers. Indeed, the reason for the formation of the Council was to unite PTA's to work for school improvement. Questions with respect to bond issues, increased appropriations for schools, salary increases for teachers, and federal aid for education are at the forefront through the years as well as in 1949."

* * *

"The Citizens Fight for Better Schools in Arlington, Virginia;" prepared for the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools by B. Alden Lillywhite and Others; published (mimeo) 1949.

This is, in its own words: "a summary account of what happened to

*EDITOR'S NOTE: *The method of selecting School Board members had been altered as will appear in the account below.*

the community's public schools when defense activities of the Federal Government engulfed the area with new population, and the existing school administration appeared incapable or unwilling to meet the resulting problems."

As early as 1940, the school plant in Arlington was inadequate for a population of 37,000 people. The entire system was on half-day sessions for first and second grades; there were no public kindergartens, and no provision whatever for exceptional children. The schools were organized on a tri-mester system, and there was no standard salary scale for teachers. As the pressure of new population was felt, the schools became increasingly more crowded. Operating budgets did not keep pace with the growth of school population; good teachers became more difficult to hire; the educational standards further deteriorated. A number of both old and new County residents began to attend School Board meetings, to ask questions, and to make requests for much needed improvements. "The reception by the Board was not too cordial." At that time, the five Board members were appointed by a School Trustee Electoral Board which in turn was appointed by the Circuit Court Judge. This system effectively removed the School Board from responsiveness to the people.

In 1946, a County leader in the efforts for school improvement was supported by a number of citizens for appointment to the School Board. A former member of the Board was renamed. Belief grew that the school administration's chief interests were maintaining the status quo and keeping expenditures for school purposes as low as possible. Some of the more courageous parents raised questions in PTA meetings and succeeded in getting committees appointed to look into the more obvious needs of the school system.

A Citizens Committee for School Improvement (CCSI) grew out of the suggestion that a petition for a school bond issue election be circulated. The first major effort of the new organization was to circulate a petition calling for a bond issue of \$3.25 million to establish public kindergartens, provide full-day sessions in first and second grades, and expand elementary and secondary school facilities. In a period of four weeks, the signatures of 5,000 taxpayers were secured (only 1,000 were needed) and filed with the School Board in August 1946. The election on the bond issue was requested for the November general election date. The School Board ignored the request but eventually called for a special election to be held in May 1947 when a bond issue totaling \$6 million requiring a vote on four separate school items would be placed before the people at the same time that they would be asked to vote on \$5.15 million general County bonds. This was viewed by the CCSI as an obvious move to defeat the entire program.

In the interval between the November and May elections, a special session of the Virginia General Assembly had been called. CCSI was

successful in getting a Bill enacted which permitted the Arlington voters to decide at the polls: (a) whether they wanted to change the method of selecting their School Board members and (b) if so, whether they should be elected by popular vote or appointed by the County Board. This question also was placed on the ballot for the May 27, 1947, election. A strenuous campaign was conducted which resulted in a majority of those voting favoring a change to popular election of School Board members. One bond issue, for \$1,776,000 to expand elementary school facilities passed. More than 10,000 persons voted, the largest number in the history of the County in a special election, and the third largest number ever voting up to then.

Immediately after this election, representatives of five county-wide organizations began to plan some means of nominating individuals to run for the School Board who would be truly representative of the people of the County and would serve with distinction. Fifty-one local or county-wide organizations accepted invitations to send delegates to a Nominating Convention. This was held on the nights of August 7 and 9, 1947. The five candidates selected undertook a vigorous effort to inform the people about school matters.

In addition to the persons selected by the Nominating Convention, four of the five incumbent School Board members, and three other persons entered the race. The school improvement candidates won the election by an overwhelming vote, the Convention nominee who received the smallest number of votes getting 2,000 more than any member of the opposition.

The old School Board brought a suit challenging the constitutionality of the law under which the new Board had been elected. The lower court decision was in favor of the new Board; the old Board appealed, and it was not until October 1948 that the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals upheld the constitutionality of the law.

Shortly after the election one of the local newspapers had called for dissolution of the Citizens' Committee "since its major job was done." It was decided that there was still a field in which the Committee could continue to give leadership, in studying school matters and recommending courses of action to the School Board. It was particularly aroused by the action of the County Board in cutting the School Board's 1948-49 budget request, and its provisions of a lump sum appropriation rather than a tax rate equivalent for school purposes. This caused the CCSI to enter the fight for the election of a nonpartisan candidate for the County Board in the 1948 election.

The account of this citizen effort concludes by pointing with pride to a change in the attitude of the parents, the school staff and school administration toward meeting the problems that confronted the County's educational system. "There is now a feeling of mutual respect, and a cooperative relationship that is more important from the standpoint of

future accomplishments" than the gains which had already been secured. It adds: "It should be pointed out clearly that these accomplishments in Arlington County are by no means the results solely of the Citizens Committee for School Improvement. Other organizations in the County played major roles, as did a number of persons who never joined the Committee. The Citizens Committee took the lead in the fight for school improvement, after it was formed, but the accomplishments are the result of co-operative effort on the part of many groups and interested citizens."