

XII. An Interview with Superintendent Richard Fickel

Dr. Richard Fickel has been an educator for 38 years. Twenty of those years were spent in the Santa Cruz public school system. During his lifetime in the field of education he has served as teacher, principal, truant officer, educational consultant, college instructor, district superintendent--and has held the post of Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools for 11 years, since October of 1967. He will retire, at the age of 58, at the end of this year (1978).

His career has spanned some of the most turbulent and exciting years that public education has ever witnessed. In the summer of this year we interviewed Fickel to get an idea of what those years of change were like, especially as they affected Santa Cruz County, and to learn what he thinks about the state of education today and its probable future course.

Fickel was born in Wenatchee, Washington, in 1920. Both his parents were ministers of the Church of God, and the family moved

twice during his early school years, following the call of their pioneer ministry: to Arcata, California, in 1925, and then to Live Oak (north of Yuba City) in 1929. His father worked at various jobs to eke out the family's meager income.

Neither of his parents had been to college, but they wanted a college education for their son; his father had taught high school in his earlier years and the family put a high value on education. Fickel made his decision to become a teacher when he was five or six years old. "It has always been my goal to go into teaching," he says. "I just never knew anything else."

His father died when Fickel was in the eighth grade. After his freshman year his mother was called to a pastorate in Santa Cruz, and they moved here in 1934. Fickel attended Santa Cruz High School and worked part-time as a can stacker in a local cannery to help out with expenses. He graduated in 1937 and then for two years attended Reedley Junior College near Fresno. At Reedley he met his future wife, Manilla Mosher. They had much in common: her parents were ministers also, and she was studying to become a teacher. Both attended Fresno State Teachers' College after Reedley.

Fickel graduated from Fresno State in the summer of 1940 and began the search for his first teaching job.

"Jobs were scarce as hen's teeth then," he recalls. "We would drive all over the country, five or six of us in a car, going from school district to school district applying for jobs. I can still remember those places we went for interviews--usually two- or three-room schoolhouses, with backless benches along the sides of dimly lit hallways. There would be 20 or 30 people sitting there, waiting for an interview with the board. The board was usually made up of farm people. They'd have you bid against the others: 'So-and-so said he'd take the job for a thousand a year. How much will you take it for?' There were no salary schedules. Those bidden jobs usually went for \$1,000 to \$1,300. The going salary at the time, recommended by the state, was \$1,320 a year."

Fickel got his first teaching job at Central Union Elementary School in Lemoore, outside of Fresno, and got a good salary--\$1,500. But he earned it.

"I taught the fifth and sixth grades--56 students in a composition grade, all in one room. I also taught all the vocal and instrumental music. I was the vice-principal of the school. I also drove the school bus, and I was the 4-H advisor. I was going from seven to seven every day."

In addition to this, he had to stay up two nights a week watching for airplanes. The war had just begun and the fear of an enemy attack was real. Teachers were expected to serve as examples to the community by participating in nightly airplane watches.

Fickel recalls: "Everyone in the school signed up for those watches. Manilla and I signed up for the midnight to six a.m. stint, twice a week. We had an old tent heated with a kerosene stove, and with two cots in it. We'd take turns watching, and whenever a plane came over we had to call into the central headquarters in Fresno and tell them."

During the early war years anti-Japanese feeling ran high. "There were quite a few Japanese farm families that lived in our region," Fickel recollects. "All of them were herded together into buses and taken to various concentration centers. It didn't affect our school because we had no Japanese students, but it did significantly affect school districts 20 or 30 miles away. And I remember before the concentration centers started, one instance where some youngsters in one elementary school had developed such an emotional attitude toward the Japanese because of the war, that they actually hung a Japanese boy. Killed him."

Fickel had enlisted in the Air Force in July of 1941, but wasn't called up for duty for a year and a half. "The war was heating up. War stories were rampant. Submarines were reported off the coast of Santa Cruz." He and his wife, now pregnant, spent a summer raising sweet potatoes for the war effort. The anxiety of waiting for his call to report made it difficult to concentrate on his classroom duties, and in November of 1942 Fickel quit his position at Central Union and went to work in a scrap metal reclamation project in Santa Cruz.

In February of 1943 he finally got his call to report for duty. He spent two years as an Air Force instructor, and then was

assigned to Guam as a second lieutenant radar bombardier navigator. During the closing days of the war he flew several bombing raids over Japan.

In April of 1946 he returned to Santa Cruz, where Manilla had bought a house on Windsor Street, to resume his teaching career. This time, however, he didn't have to go looking for a job. "I wasn't even out of uniform yet. One day the lady in the yard next door leaned over the fence and said, 'I understand that you're a teacher. I'm Edith Fikes, the county superintendent of schools.' She said that the principal at Scotts Valley School, Ruby Owens, was ill, and they couldn't find a substitute--and would I take the job? So I ended up at Scotts Valley." He finished out that school year and stayed on for four years as teaching principal.

Scotts Valley Union Elementary School (today it is Scotts Valley Intermediate) was located on Bean Creek Road and Scotts Valley Drive. "Scotts Valley Drive used to be old Highway 17," Fickel recollects, "but there was very little traffic. There were hardly any businesses or buildings along it then. The school setting was rather primitive--manzanita and underbrush and poison oak came right up to the school all around."

When Fickel arrived at the school there were about 100 pupils there, in grades first through eighth, with four teachers and four classrooms. All classrooms contained combination grades.

"It was a typical country school. We had some buses, but most kids walked. Some would come to school on their horses. The kids were primarily from farming families. Everybody wore jeans, boys and girls alike.

"I had a difficult time with that when I first went there. You couldn't tell the girls from the boys. I started a dress code and had the girls start wearing dresses, so that they would be treated like girls."

In 1946 the war-time "baby boom" had begun to hit the schools, with a surge of first-graders entering school. By 1947 the crunch was even more evident, both in Santa Cruz County and statewide. Fickel remembers it as a challenging time for the Scotts Valley School

staff. (In 1947 his fellow teachers were Phair Sinnott, Vivian Rice, Lena Thomas, and Marion Johnstone. On the school board were Clifford Kilfoyl, Harry Voss, Walter Teman, Otto Kersten, and Carl Roynon.) Fickel tells about those days:

"We were so overcrowded, we had three classes going in the auditorium--one on the stage and two on the floor, divided by four by six partitions. There was no soundproofing. It was terrible--you can't believe how noisy it was! On Friday we'd take out all the partitions and pile them against the wall, and put in chairs, and we'd show movies for the community every Friday and Saturday nights. We charged 25 cents for the movies, and started a fund to get a community center started.

"And then there was the old Scotts Valley firehouse, down on the corner of Scotts Valley Drive. They had moved out and gave the building to the school. We put a class of about 20 down there. It had a dirt floor, and when it rained Vivian [Rice] would have to put half the kids on one side of the room and half on the other because the water would run right down the middle.

"And then we rented space from the Christian Church campground across the street on Bean Creek Road, and had a primary class over there. It was freezing there--I don't know how the kids ever lived through it.

"Finally in 1947 we mounted a drive, took a survey, and were able to get in on some of the \$50 million that was being given away to schools at that time. It was an outright gift which didn't have to be paid back. The state saw our need and gave us the money to build two or three additional classrooms in 1948."

During the time Fickel was there the school's attendance about doubled, and the staff grew from four to 10. "The conditions were tough," Fickel notes, "but they were typical of schools throughout the county. Holding classes wherever they could find space. Soquel School was meeting in churches and in buildings across the street. Felton was meeting in churches too. Boulder Creek was able to build some extra rooms, so they kept ahead. Santa Cruz City started building new schools about that time, Aptos built two, Pajaro was in

the process of a building program most of the time in those years-- from around 1948 to around '51 or '52 there was a lot of construction going on all over the county."

Yet in spite of the adverse physical conditions of those years, Fickel believes the morale of the teachers was high and the children enjoyed school. "It was a real challenge--and we had a lot of fun. There was a real feeling of community, of family, among the kids and the teachers and the parents. That was still the era when education was recognized as an opportunity and a privilege rather than a right, and so there was dedication to the need for education. Kids did learn. Our test scores were very good.

"There was a better feeling of community throughout the entire county school system than exists now, I think. Maybe it was because we were smaller and we were all faced with the same kinds of problems. All the members of the educational community knew one another. We'd get together.

"For instance, we had an annual Field Day at Soquel. That was really a great experience, and everyone looked forward to it. All schools in the county were invited. We'd have maybe a thousand kids and their parents show up. They organized field games of all kinds for primaries right on through eighth grade. The PTA would bring food and sell crafts. We'd close the day with a series of softball games, with ribbons given out to winners. It was a big event. Paul Walters was the Soquel superintendent then, and Del Miller was the assistant. He died just this last year."

And Fickel recalls another countywide school event: "Once a year we'd put on a massive musical activity at the Civic Auditorium in downtown Santa Cruz. All the buses from schools all over the county would bring their kids, and we'd have a thousand kids singing and playing."

In 1950 County Superintendent Edith Fikes asked Fickel to go to work at the County Office of Education (then located on the second floor of the jailhouse on Front Street in Santa Cruz) as Child Welfare and Attendance Officer--otherwise known as the truant officer. Of the duties in his new job Fickel comments: "Principals would call

me up and say so-and-so hasn't been in school, and as 'hookey cop' I'd go out to the home and tell the parents we wanted the pupil at school. If we didn't get cooperation, we'd go to referee court. I worked with all the schools to maintain attendance controls and records.

"And we started a county-wide testing program, which was my responsibility in those days. We were one of the first counties to have a test scoring machine. We gave the tests and scored them, and sent out the results.

"When I was the CWA officer I had to visit all the schools in the county monthly. In those days there were schools way off in the boonies, all over the county. For example, Central School was in operation at that time--you'd go up Highway 17, turn north on a winding dirt road clear up on the top of nowhere. That round trip was 93 miles. Mrs. [Violet] Isidoro was the teacher of the one-room school up there, with about half a dozen pupils. Then there was Seaside School in Swanton, up above Davenport--another one-room school with about six students. It was really back in the hills. They were different people entirely up there, really fine people. They didn't get out to town very often, just lived back in the mountains.

"The high school at Boulder Creek didn't have many students, but they had an auto shop, a swimming pool--they really had a great thing going up there in Boulder Creek. There was only one school in Soquel then. And there were Corralitos, Salsipuedes, Freedom--all now part of the Pajaro Valley District, which unified in 1965."

Fickel remembers the bitter controversy over the unification of San Lorenzo Valley School District in the early '50s. Many of the independent Valley people strongly resisted the merger of small school districts with their separate, individual school boards into a single larger district. It did not happen without a battle.

"I was here in the county office and Edith [Fikes] gave me the job of coordinating the San Lorenzo Valley unification election. They were fighting tooth and nail--Felton, Ben Lomond, Brookdale, Boulder Creek, Zayante, Lompico--they just didn't get along with one another at all. It was a rainy day when the election took place. I got calls

in the office saying, 'Get up here! There are people who are not following the election code.' I found people inside the polling area right next to the booths--you're supposed to stay 100 feet away--screaming and hollering at each other, telling people how to vote and how not to vote, people fighting with one another. It was a mess, it was terrible. They were trying to stuff the ballot box, they were trying to keep people from voting. I had to threaten them with the sheriff. But it finally worked out. It passed handily. Howard Hazel-tine was superintendent of San Lorenzo Union District at that time, and he left because he was against unification with San Lorenzo Valley. He went to Bonny Doon School.

"There was a big trend toward unification in those days. In the '60s the state required all districts to study the issue and make an attempt to unify, if it was feasible. Pajaro Valley became unified in 1965. There were three elections in the north county area, in an attempt to get Scotts Valley, Live Oak, and Soquel to unify with Santa Cruz, but all three elections failed miserably, so we decided there was no point in trying to get them to merge."

What were the advantages of unification, and has it worked? Fickel answers: "The idea was that in a unified district you could provide better education and more services than would have been possible in a smaller district, because you had more students and a bigger tax base, and maybe you could reduce the number of administrators. But it doesn't cost less money. And, in my opinion, it takes away local control. In Pajaro where you had five boards of trustees you only have one now. In San Lorenzo Valley where you had three or four distinct boards there is only one now. The boards are doing a good job, but it takes the schools farther away from the people.

"I would have to say that in my opinion unification in Santa Cruz County has not really worked well. The communities that were forced into unification by election had such a strong identity of their own, and the socio-economic, cultural mix of those communities has been so varied, that there's never been a real blend take place. I don't want to go back to the 'good old days' of the little red schoolhouse with one room--I don't think that's as effective a way of educating youngsters and providing them with the kinds of experiences they need. But take Scotts Valley District for an example, with only three

schools. It hasn't unified with anybody. The same with Soquel or Live Oak districts. Those sizes I believe are desirable. I don't think unification is always effective."

During the time he worked at the County Office of Education, Fickel commuted to Stanford University and received his master's degree from that institution in 1951. He ran for Santa Cruz City Council and almost won. He left the county office in 1952 and received his doctoral degree in education and school administration from Stanford in 1954.

In the following years he served as curriculum consultant for the Inglewood Unified School District in Los Angeles County, and as assistant superintendent and then superintendent of the Walnut Creek Elementary School District. Then in 1963 he went to San Jose State as an instructor, intending to become a college professor. But this was not to be. A year later he was called for an interview at Cabrillo College, thinking it was for a position at that college. The interview, however, turned out to be for the superintendency of the San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District, a job for which Fickel had sent in an application and then forgot about. He got the job. He and his wife and two daughters moved back to Santa Cruz County, taking up residence in Scotts Valley. "We always had wanted to come back to this area," he says.

Three years later, in the fall of 1967, Norman "Sig" Lien retired from the post of county superintendent of schools with a year remaining of his term, and invited the superintendents of all school districts in the county to apply for the job. At the urging of his old college advisor Fickel submitted his application, and was selected for the position. He has served in the post since that time, having twice successfully stood for election. He will retire at the end of December, 1978, after 11 years of service.

We asked Fickel what changes he had witnessed during his years in education.

The pace of learning has accelerated and its scope widened tremendously, he believes. The launching of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in the cold war years of the '50s marked the beginning of the space age and caused a major shift in the direction of the curriculum.

"The new math, the 'why-Johnnie-can't-read' controversy, the new emphasis on science--all these came about in the '50s, after Sputnik, as a direct result of the need for the United States to keep up with Russia in the field of science. It was really a big influence, I should say it was. The back-to-the-basics movement, phonics, the stress on math, chemistry, biology, physics--all the things that happened in the educational field after 1957 and into the '60s were a direct outgrowth of our need to keep up. It really had little to do with our own internal need, but Russia was there as a threat. The cold war was on.

"Now of course the new math is beginning to recede, pass out of favor. But some of the things that came with the new math we're going to keep. Research into the processes of learning has changed the curriculum too. We have better materials and teaching techniques as a result of research. There's no doubt, for example, that the reading program today is much stronger than it ever was, because we have a much profounder understanding of the technical act of reading, compared to what we had 30 or 40 years ago. So today it's not just 'phonetics' or 'look-say,' but a combination of both teaching methods."

What of the often heard criticism that schools aren't doing as good a job today as they did in the past, as evidenced by declining scores on college entrance tests?

"When people make that criticism they overlook the differences in today's student, as compared with 25 or 30 years ago," he responds. "Television was just beginning then, mass communication was just beginning to explode. The youngster that comes to school today has had thousands of hours of televiewing that our kids back then never had. He comes prepared today to read, to write, to spell, to participate in a different way than he did then. We're competing in the classroom with the television syndrome of acting--you've almost got to make a production out of your teaching program if you're going to keep the attention of the kids. Television solves everything in 30 minutes. But you don't 'solve' education in 30 minutes. It takes 30 years--just to get started.

"What's happened is that people's expectations of public education have changed in the last 30 years--and those expectations are

unrealistic. People remember how it was 30 years ago, but there's been a geometric explosion of knowledge since then--and it's all available. You can't evaluate what's happening today on the basis of what it was like 30 years ago.

"For example, take the shibboleth of test scores--college entrance exams. We don't realize that college entrance exams 30 years ago were given to a very select group of students. Everyone didn't aspire to go to college in those days--only about 25 or 30 per cent of high school graduates, at the most, were 'creamed off the top' and given the test. The rest of the kids weren't tested. Today we test almost everybody. Well, when you test 100 per cent of the universe as compared with testing the top 30 per cent, your scores are going to be watered down by that other 70 per cent; so naturally the scores are going to be relatively lower. And we should remember that more kids are going off to college now than ever did before.

"The fact is, on the whole, kids today read better, cipher better, speak better than they ever have--although there's some evidence that they don't write better. Mt. Diablo Unified School District a few years ago took the very same achievement test that was given to kids in 1948 and gave it to their students. They outscored the 1948 kids by so many points it was ludicrous.

"I won't accept the indictment of public schools, people saying that we're failing the student. In my opinion youngsters are learning more and better today than they ever have in the history of public education."

And what of discipline in the classroom today, as compared with days gone by? And what about parent involvement?

"Discipline is much more difficult today. Teachers then were respected and expected to do anything necessary to maintain discipline. Students were made to toe the line, and we didn't have much trouble with them. They knew the teacher had the authority. The parent expected the teacher to assume that authority. The teacher disciplined the child at school and then, if the parents learned of it, they re-disciplined the child at home.

"Thirty or 40 years ago parents looked up to the school with a good deal of respect. There were fewer parents then who had anything better than an elementary or high school education themselves. Now we have many more parents with college educations. The scientific revolution has caused significant changes in the evaluation of life and institutions. As a result of that, parents are more critical and no longer look up to the school for anything. They demand of the school a certain level of performance. I believe it's a good thing for parents to become involved in the education of their children, but I think there's a trend developing today toward over-involvement, interference. Teaching should be left to the teachers, who know how to teach. Parents have a right to say to educators, 'This is the content we'd like to have taught,' but they need to leave the teachers alone to do the job they were trained to do."

What about the plethora of state and federal legislation that regulates so much of the educational field today?

"We're over-legislated, and I think it's tragic. There's no rhyme nor reason to what has gone on. Education is a function of the state, that's true, but only up to the point of insuring that there is an educational system providing minimal state support. I think education ought to be determined at the local level, by the local board of trustees, and the parents in the community, and the teachers working together. Of course, now with the passage of Proposition 13, which shifts the main financial burden of the schools from the local level to the state, I expect we'll see a steady eroding of local control and more and more dictation from the state level as to how we should run our schools."

What other changes have occurred in public education? Fickel gives his opinion:

"I think that over the years society generally has begun to take a dimmer view of public education as a process, holds it in lower respect than it did years ago. I think that's dangerous because it could result in the destruction of public education as we've known it. It's one of the bulwarks of democracy, and it should be held up as such, and protected and cherished as such."

"People today don't look at the philosophical aspect of education as an institution. They're more interested in criticizing it, tearing it down, letting everyone do their own thing. I think the 'do your own thing' syndrome is one of the most disastrous ideas that's ever hit education. The concept of inter-dependence we used to promote years ago we don't spend much time talking about today. It's the difference that counts, it's not sameness that anybody wants any more. But I think sameness has a lot of value for us. As I've observed kids over the years I've found that when youngsters are grouped together and have a chance in a group to depend on one another that they exhibit a greater satisfaction with school living than I see now in classrooms of 30 youngsters, all going 30 different, unique ways.

"Yet on the whole I think schools provide better education today than they did when I started. I don't believe the school climate is as comfortable today for teacher, for child, for parent, as it was some years ago. I don't know that it's possible for it to be comfortable, as chaotic as life is, with the explosion of learning. With the massacre in Zaire on the television tube right in front of us. With the assassination of a president happening on the tube right in front of us. With the instantaneous communication systems that we have today. It keeps us in a state of emotional turmoil, more than we were in 40 years ago, obviously.

"I think we've got a lot of maturing to do as a society before we get comfortable again. But I believe people can solve that. They have in the past and they're going to continue to do it. The secret of all this is cooperation. It's not pressure, it's not dictating, it's a real commitment to cooperation."

And, on the eve of his retirement, Fickel sums up his feelings: "I can only say I'm glad I was in education. It's been a tremendous experience. I think this profession provides an individual with the greatest outlet for service than any profession you could find anywhere. I think this profession is greater than medicine, greater than religion, greater than the law, by far. You have an opportunity over a lifetime to be part of so many changes. You touch so many lives."