

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

## We can't afford to keep raising school taxes

Why does the Pottstown School District have the 11th highest taxes of 500 districts in Pennsylvania?

Why has school district spending increased at triple the rate of inflation over the last 15 years?

In short, it is because the Pottstown School Board has traditionally deferred to district administrators on spending decisions.

We are a relatively poor district. Yet in 2007-2008, the most recent school year for which statewide statistics are available, Pottstown's per-pupil spending was higher than 83 percent of the districts in the commonwealth.

Pennsylvania itself ranks 15th out of the 50 states in per pupil school spending — higher than 70 percent of the states.

But Pottstown administrators believe we are still not spending enough money on education.

Their belief is reinforced by the 2007 "Costing-Out" study conducted on behalf of the Pennsylvania Board of Education to determine how much school districts should spend to ensure all students will become proficient in reading and math.

The study said that school districts, on average, should increase spending 25 percent. The study suggested the Pottstown School District should be spending 30 percent more. According to the study, only 30 of Pennsylvania's 500 districts were already spending an adequate amount.

The study was embraced not only by the state's educational establishment, but by the opinion pages of many Pennsylvania newspapers.

As a result, with the strong support of Gov. Rendell, the legislature boosted school funding and changed the funding formula for the state's 500 school districts to favor poor districts and those with high rates of taxation.

The new formula has greatly benefited Pottstown and brought about a 43 percent increase in state funding — \$5 million more annually — over the amount we received just three years ago.

Meanwhile, for more than a decade, our school district has talked about the need to renovate our elementary schools. But

our administrators did not recommend setting aside any money in capital reserve to help pay for needed upgrades. Instead, we hired more staff and inaugurated new programs.

Now we have a pension funding crisis. School districts statewide face an astronomical 500 percent increase in payments to the state pension system over the next three years.

This year, Pottstown faces a \$1.8 million deficit in the upcoming 2010-2011 budget, assuming the district raises taxes 4 percent. Without a tax increase, the district faces a \$2.9 million deficit this year.

And the deficit could be even worse next year.

At the same time, the total assessed valuation of Pottstown real estate continues to

plummet as businesses leave town and more property owners appeal their assessments.

As a Pottstown school director, I recognize we cannot continue to increase taxes.

The "Costing-Out" study assumes that more spending equals better education. But that's not necessarily so.

The Commonwealth Foundation, a conservative think tank in Harrisburg, points out that the study focused solely on the current spending patterns of public schools and did not look for ways that education dollars could be spent more efficiently.

In Pottstown's case, as we've pointed out on our Web site, the school district has 40 percent more employees today than it did three decades ago, when the district enrolled 20 percent more students than it has now. Far more employees, many fewer students. Have we seen a commensurate increase in the quality of education?

Because salaries and benefits consume two-thirds of the school district's budget, downsizing our staff is the obvious way to cut costs. If we reduce staff to the level we had just 10 years ago, by my calculations, we could save perhaps \$3 million annually. I believe the school district should seriously consider this option.

*This column expresses the personal views of Tom Hylton and does not represent the views of any other person or any organization.*



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