

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Pottstown schools face dramatic changes

The Pottstown School District must dramatically change its operations and structure in the next few years. Here's why:

Economics

State subsidies, which have risen substantially in recent years, will be reduced as Gov. Corbett wrestles with a \$4 billion deficit. At the same time, mandatory payments into the state teachers pension fund will gradually increase from 5 percent of payroll last year to more than 20 percent of payroll four years from now. Sizable budget cuts will be needed.

Philosophy

Gov. Corbett believes competition and choice will improve the quality and efficiency of education, and the state Senate conducted a hearing Feb. 16 on a bill to provide state vouchers for private schools. It might well pass.

Technology

Computer technology is revolutionizing education everywhere. Most organized knowledge is now available to anyone on the Internet.

Instructional videos on just about every topic imaginable are now available on websites like YouTube. Many colleges are putting lectures online. Sal Kahn, known as "Bill Gates' favorite teacher," has created more than 1,600 short videos teaching all the math and science that appears on SATs and other standardized tests, available free on his website. Kahn plans to eventually cover the entire K-12 curriculum.

And unlike a real-life classroom, the student can keep playing the same video lesson over and over again until it sinks in.

A growing number of public school students are learning at home through cyber charter schools. Colleges and high schools now use "distance learning" for students in classrooms miles away from the teacher, using closed-circuit television to communicate. We even have online universities with complete degree programs using the Internet.

Thanks to the digital revolution, anyone who's acquired the basic skills of reading and listening can enjoy lifelong learning—learning that is becoming easier to attain, higher in quality, and vastly less expensive than we could have imagined just 20 years ago.

Education not the same as a school

Education and school systems are not the same thing. Education starts at birth and continues until we die.

School systems comprise a formal structure of teachers following a progressive cur-

riculum that begins at age four or five and continues until the end of high school or college. Schools aim to teach young people the skills and attitudes needed for lifelong learning.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Public, private, charter

Like most communities, the Pottstown area has a variety of school systems, including:

- * Public schools
- * Secular private schools
- * Religious private schools
- * Charter schools, which are quasi-public schools (privately operated, publicly funded).

Charter schools can be either bricks and mortar schools, such as Renaissance Academy in Phoenixville, or cyber charter schools, in which students work in front of computers at home and receive their lessons from distant teachers using the Internet.

Public schools most costly system

Except for elite private schools like The Hill School, public schools are by far the most expensive school system. They operate under an elaborate and often stultifying framework of rules and regulations, including union contracts. Moreover, unlike private and charter schools, Pennsylvania public schools must accept everyone from kindergarten or first grade through high school (for special education, from ages 3 through 21).

Improving education, cutting costs

For decades, the mantra of the public school establishment has been, "We need more money!" A "costing-out" study conducted by Pennsylvania public school advocates in 2007 concluded that statewide, public schools should be spending 25 percent more than they are. The study affirmed the conventional view that increased spending will improve the quality of public schools.

But is it possible we could cut funding to public schools while increasing their quality? Some people think we can.

Now that we face a budget crisis, we'll need to try.

Learning from private schools

In the coming days, I will look at alternative forms of education that are often equal or superior to most public schools — and cost less to operate — to see what we can learn from them. One thing is for sure: Public schools must adapt to changing times.

Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not those of the school board or administration.