

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Local Christian schools do more with less

Gov. Tom Corbett has called for innovation, competition and choice in our education system. The following is one of a series of articles about different approaches to education.

After decades of steady increases, state funding for public schools is expected to decline over the next few years because of huge state deficits and rising fixed costs such as pension obligations. We must learn to live with diminished resources.

Here in the Pottstown area, we can find no better example of doing more with less than our Christian private schools, Coventry Christian School in Lower Pottsgrove and West-Mont Christian Academy in North Coventry. (We will discuss parochial schools on Monday.)

Both schools boast high academic achievement. The SAT scores at both schools (all juniors in both schools are required to take the test) are well above the national average. Ninety-six percent of Coventry graduates go to a four-year college; about 80 percent of West-Mont graduates enroll in college.

Tuition at both schools is less than \$7,000 annually; by state law, the Pottstown School District charges \$11,000 for an out-of-district student, which is well below its actual cost of nearly \$16,000 per student.

Both Christian schools were founded on a shoestring in the early 1980s and have grown to offer a K - 12 education on their own campuses. Both pride themselves on their small, family atmosphere. Coventry Christian, which also has a pre-K program, enrolls about 360 students; West-Mont has 315.

"We find kids thrive in a small school," said Paul Fisher, principal of Coventry's secondary school. "No one is typecast, because everyone knows everyone else. The family atmosphere relieves a lot of anxiety. In a big school, kids often never have the chance to relate to an adult. Here, they do."

Coventry elementary students are taught by one teacher in a self-contained classroom through fifth grade. From sixth grade through high school, students take five core subjects: language arts, history, science, math and Bible. Because the school is so small, however, secondary students have the same teachers for multiple years.

Another advantage of a small school, Fisher said, is the opportunity to participate in numerous extra-curricular activities, from soccer to the yearbook to music.

Freed from the rigid guidelines enforced in public schools, teachers in small private

schools have much more freedom to personalize learning for each student, said James Smock, administrator at West-Mont. That's a major reason why they are willing to work for salaries that are about half those of their public school counterparts.

"When teachers feel they have ownership in what they are doing, and what they are doing is important, it changes everything," Fisher said. "Our teachers really want to be here. There is a sense we all bear responsibility for all our students."

One teacher actually donated his salary back to the school, Fisher said. But many teachers need to make ends meet with another source of income, such as a working spouse.

Both schools use facilities that public schools deemed inadequate and abandoned. But having toured them myself, I can attest they are well-maintained, cheerful, and safe.

West-Mont purchased the former North Coventry Elementary School in 1996, which consists of two buildings: a 1912 building used for K through 5; and a 1951 building used as a middle-high school.

In 2003, Coventry Christian Schools purchased the former Lower Pottsgrove Elementary School, which was built in 1939. Pottsgrove School District parents and teachers had continually complained about mold in the building, even after the district remediated the problem.

Before buying the building, Coventry officials hired their own industrial hygienist to conduct another study, which also concluded there was no problem. Just to make sure, Coventry replaced all the ductwork and classroom ventilators. The school is complete with a gym, library, chapel, and cafeteria.

Meanwhile, the Pottsgrove School District renovated the vacant Pottsgrove Intermediate School on Buchert Road into a new elementary school at a cost of \$10 million.

Both Christian schools have a high level of parental participation — helping teachers, fundraising, and maintaining the buildings.

"When we need something done," Fisher said, "we put out an email and some parent with experience in that field will volunteer."

Fisher said his school has a close relationship with its parents. "There is a lot of accountability here because parents are paying tuition."

Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not the board's.



Commentary by
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