

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

## Pottstown parochial school nears century mark

*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.*

Parochial schools have been around longer than public school districts in Pennsylvania. By the time Gov. Wolf signed Pennsylvania's Free School Act in 1834, Catholic schools had already been operating for half a century.

Here in Pottstown, St. Aloysius Elementary School has been a downtown landmark since 1912, when a school was constructed on North Hanover Street next to the church. The original building is now a part of a four-building campus. In the 1960s, when enrollment peaked at more than 600 students, a second classroom building was constructed behind the church. A former auto parts store adjacent to the campus was purchased in 1973 and converted into a cafeteria and gymnasium.

Last year, the church completed a Gathering Center on the site of the former rectory, with two classrooms on the ground floor used for a new pre-school program for 3- and 4-year olds.

The school hopes to attract more families by offering both pre-school and day care before and after school, said Jack Schulte, the principal. With just 270 students in grades K-8, the school needs to increase its enrollment to thrive in the coming years. The campus has room to comfortably accommodate 450 students.

Because Catholic schools have retained the same basic structure for decades, some people consider them old-fashioned.

But academics report Catholic schools consistently outperform public schools, especially in urban areas,

James Coleman, the University of Chicago's eminent educational sociologist, reported that Catholic school students nationwide average more than one full grade level above public school students. His findings applied to students of all races, incomes, and family backgrounds — non-Catholic as well as Catholic.

In public schools, the performance of students from different backgrounds tends to diverge as they go through school, Cole-

man found. In Catholic schools, student achievement becomes more alike.

"Thus we have the paradoxical result that Catholic schools come closer to the American ideal of the 'common school,' educating all alike, than do the public schools," Coleman wrote.

As a Pottstown School Board member, one thing that jumps out at me is how Catholic schools establish priorities. For example, Pottstown has a lavishly renovated and expanded middle school, but only two of its classrooms have smart boards.

St. Aloysius, on the other hand, has carefully maintained rather than rebuilt its older buildings, which boast interactive smart boards in every classroom, including kindergarten and pre-school. Teachers use them to teach basic concepts, to take virtual tours of public places — even to network with other classes worldwide.

The smart boards were purchased thanks to constant fundraising by a dedicated and deeply involved cadre of parents.

"We have a high level of parental participation in every aspect of the school," Schulte said, "and we have an ethic of volunteerism that reinforces our Christian values." For example, sixth, seventh and eighth graders work with a food pantry for needy families, and in Scouting.

St. Aloysius has self-contained classrooms through fourth grade. Fifth graders have two teachers, one for math and science, and another for English and social studies.

A team of four teachers share the sixth, seventh and eighth grades, which means the students have the same teachers for three years.

Thanks to the school's small size, everyone has a chance to participate in numerous extra-curricular activities, such as the bi-annual school musical.

Like parochial schools nationwide, St. Aloysius has been adversely affected by the migration of middle class families from older towns to the suburbs.

"But we still have a vital role to play here in Pottstown," Schulte said.

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



Commentary by  
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