

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

## Locals find Renaissance School worth a ride

*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.*

One of the greatest strengths of Pottstown public schools is their proximity to parents and students. No school is more than five or ten minutes from any house in the borough.

Yet nearly 40 Pottstown students are willing to take a half-hour ride, one way, to attend the Renaissance Academy Charter School on the campus of Valley Forge Christian College in Phoenixville.

Tuition is free. Under Pennsylvania law, the Pottstown School District must pay Renaissance \$9,300 for each Pottstown student enrolled, and \$27,533 for each special education student enrolled.

However, because Renaissance Academy is more than 10 miles from Pottstown, parents must provide their own transportation.

So what's the big attraction for parents?

First, Renaissance Academy is a small school, serving 930 students in grades K through 12. All the students and teachers know each other.

Second, Renaissance is academically rigorous. The curriculum is geared to college, and the school day is a half-hour to an hour longer than most public schools. Students wear uniforms; different colored polo tops denote their grade level.

About 95 percent of Renaissance students attend college after graduation.

All students take Spanish, starting in kindergarten, and all students have at least two periods of fine arts daily, including art, music, drama, dance, yoga, graphics, and physical education.

Starting in tenth grade, students can take Advanced Placement and college courses. Professors from Alvernia and Immaculata College offer courses at the school, and students can take college courses on-line. They can also attend selected classes at the adjacent Valley Forge Christian College.

Renaissance was founded in 1999 by an energetic group of Phoenixville parents who wanted an alternative to public schools and were granted a charter by the Phoenixville Area School District. The academy currently leases two buildings from the Christian college. Soon, the school plans to move to a renovated former factory building on Phoenixville's north side adjacent to Reservoir Park, with access to on-site athletic facilities. The new campus has room for expansion,

and the school expects to apply for permission to increase its enrollment.

At present, Renaissance Academy enrolls students from 18 public school districts, each of which is required by law to pay Renaissance about 80 percent of the cost of educating its own students. Thus, each school district pays a different amount per student. The majority of students come from the Phoenixville, Spring-Ford, and Norristown districts, which provide busing to the school.

Preference is given to siblings of current students, followed by Phoenixville school district residents. If space is still available, students are then chosen by lottery.

When Renaissance admits a special education student, the school does its own reassessment and writes a new Individualized Education Program. Although the school has special education teachers, the school practices inclusion, and with one exception, the school has no special education aides on the secondary level.

For the most part, elementary school students have one main teacher, but they switch classrooms for reading starting in first grade and math starting in third grade.

Renaissance Academy has a waiting list at every grade level, according to Jennifer Scherer, who handles admissions and gave me a tour of the school. Kindergarten alone has a waiting list of more than 60 children. "We'd have a lot more applicants from Pottstown if it was within busing distance."

Transportation was the problem for Pottstown parent Sandra Franklin, whose son Ben briefly attended Renaissance Academy. "I liked the fact it was a small school and Ben could get a lot of individualized attention," she said. "But I found it increasingly difficult to get him to and from school." Franklin transferred her son back to Pottstown Middle School, but said she would still consider a charter school if one was closer to home.

The former St. Pius High School has frequently been mentioned as a candidate for a charter school. This year, it is being used by the Pottsgrove School District to temporarily house students as the Ringing Rocks Elementary School is renovated.

But if it becomes a charter school, Pottstown will have a new, taxpayer-funded competitor at its doorstep.

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



Commentary by  
Thomas Hylton