

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

A quality education for all, at less cost

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

In the next few years, the Pottstown School District — like other districts — must dramatically change its ways.

Diminished resources

Since 1980, public school spending has risen at nearly triple the rate of inflation, an unsustainable pace.

Now we face the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. With huge debts at the state and national level, budget deficits, and an aging population, our public schools must learn to operate with diminished resources.

Increased competition

At the same time, traditional schools face increased competition from charter schools, and — if proposed state voucher legislation passes — from private schools.

During the last two weeks, I have reviewed the various kinds of schools now competing with traditional public schools. What can we learn from them?

Public schools most costly system

With few exceptions, private and charter schools cost less to operate than public schools.

By law, charter schools receive 80 percent of the cost of educating a public school student. Pottstown's two Protestant Christian schools charge less than \$7,000 per pupil tuition. St. Aloysius charges \$3,100 for Catholics and \$4,220 for others. All offer discounts for siblings. This is much less than the \$11,000 tuition charged by the Pottstown School District, or its actual per-pupil cost of nearly \$16,000.

Salaries and benefits

Salaries and benefits typically comprise two-thirds of school district budgets. Public school teachers and administrators commonly earn twice as much as their private school counterparts. Such a large differential is no longer affordable. We need to freeze or reduce public school salaries and increase the amount employees pay toward their health insurance. There is no other way.

Facilities

Private schools are also far more practical about school facilities. For example, Coventry Christian Schools and West-Mont Christian Academy both use older buildings that public schools closed as inadequate. Yet these buildings are well constructed, safe, and cheerful.

Pottstown's recently renovated middle school has an enormous gym and a large group instruction room with a cathedral ceiling, but just two smart boards. By contrast, St. Aloysius Parochial School has a smart board in every classroom of its two well-maintained school buildings, which date to 1912 and 1961.

Parental involvement

A key element to the success of private schools is parental involvement. Of course, parents willing to pay tuition have a strong interest in education, but there are ways public schools can reach out to parents more than they do. Here are two:

Small schools

In every case, our local private and charter schools are much smaller than their public school counterparts. St. Aloysius has fewer than 300 students in grades K-8. The Protestant Christian schools have fewer than 400 pupils in grades K-12. The Kimberton Waldorf School enrolls 300 students in grades K through 12.

Small schools make it much easier for students, parents and faculty to know one another. Moreover, having the same students in school for many years allows student-teacher-parent relationships to flourish.

Building relationships

Yesterday, I discussed the work of Ruby Payne, an expert in how schools can lift children out of poverty. Her ideas are particularly relevant here in Pottstown, where 65 percent of our students come from low-income families. Payne says teachers must be role models as well as instructors. Building relationships between students and teachers is essential to successful outcomes. That takes time — certainly longer than one school year. That's why Payne suggests keeping the same teacher with the same students for two or more years.

Kimberton Waldorf School keeps students together in a self-contained classroom with the same teacher from first grade through eighth grade. This fosters a family atmosphere and allows teachers to form a close relationship with students and parents.

The future

Like it or not, school choice is here to stay. We can wring our hands about it, or we can seize the initiative and find ways to partner with charter schools and private schools to improve education for all.

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