

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Rethinking school structure

Next Tuesday night, another public meeting will be conducted to discuss problems — mostly related to discipline — at Pottstown Middle School.

There is a sense that students are becoming more disrespectful, and teachers report low morale.

From my perspective as a school board member, there are two aspects to this problem. One is personnel. It's up to the principals — we have two at the middle school — to ensure the school is well run, and it's up to the superintendent to make sure the principals are doing that.

My fellow board members and I have control over only one person — the superintendent. Things are getting better, we are told, but it's at the expense of hiring yet another administrator — I hope temporarily — at the middle school.

The other aspect of the school board's job is setting policy. Ultimately, board members decide how our schools are structured.

School structure

As just one of nine board members, I suggest the middle school should be restructured. When the fifth grade first moved to the middle school in the 2013-2014 school year, the fifth grade was self-contained (one teacher teaching all major subjects), the sixth graders were taught by a team of two teachers, and the seventh and eighth graders had teams of four teachers.

This year, for whatever reason, team teaching was eliminated. Therefore, it really doesn't surprise me that discipline problems have increased.

We're turning our middle school into a junior high school, and our kids are not ready for that.

Elementary school model

Historically, elementary schools contained grades kindergarten through eighth. Most Catholic grade schools still do. And many urban school districts, including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and York, are returning to that model.

In the classic elementary school with self-contained classrooms, the teacher has the same 25 to 30 students all year and teaches all subjects — reading, math, science, social studies.

At the high school level, each teacher specializes in one subject and sees a much higher number of students over two semesters, well over 100.

Elementary school teachers, therefore, have a much better opportunity to know the whole child, while secondary teachers are more likely to see students as vessels to be filled with a prescribed amount of knowledge in math or English.

Pottstown demographics

In Pottstown, where our student body is overwhelmingly low and moderate income, knowing the whole child is more important than in districts that primarily serve middle class families.

Some of our parents struggled in school themselves.

And some families are dysfunctional and develop a whole host of destructive behaviors that children carry with them into the classroom.

In Pottstown, therefore, we need to put the individual student first and subjects second. Building relationships is more important than anything else, and to do that, we have to limit the number of students each teacher sees.

Teacher certification

Our current fifth and sixth grade teachers are certified to teach all major subjects at both grade levels.

Therefore, our fifth and sixth grades should be self-contained, and our teachers should keep the same students for both years, moving from fifth to sixth grade with their students.

This will give teachers, parents, and students an optimal amount of time to build relationships. Every child is different, and it takes time for a teacher to understand and treat each one individually. It takes time for a group of children to gel into a classroom "family."

When students are leaving the classroom for lunch, or art and music classes — even dismissal — their teacher should go with them.

Team teaching

Team teaching should be reintroduced for seventh and eighth grades, and the teams should keep the same group of students for both years.

(More on Thursday.)

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



Commentary by
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