

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

New era in education

Our world turned upside down last month when Gov. Wolf closed schools and all but essential businesses, and issued a stay-at-home order for most Pennsylvania residents.

It's anyone's guess when the order will be lifted and schools can reopen.

Thousands of us are suddenly learning new technology that allows people to socialize, work and conduct business remotely.

Last night, Pottstown Council conducted its first virtual committee of the whole meeting with all participants at home in front of their laptops interacting remotely using a software platform called GoToMeeting. Citizens with a computer or smartphone and internet connection could watch the meeting online.

The school board is also meeting remotely using another platform called Zoom, which is streamed live and archived on the district's Facebook page.

While the borough has furloughed some of its workers, everyone employed by Pennsylvania school districts as of March 13 will continue to receive a full salary and benefits through the end of the school year.

That policy is included in emergency state legislation passed March 25 that also gives the secretary of education broad latitude to waive the minimum number of school days, state testing, and myriad other rules.

School districts are required to devise and post a short-term and long-term alternative education plan on their websites. The majority of these plans will likely be based on distance learning.

Distance learning has been around since the internet boom made it feasible in the 1990s. Fourteen cyber charter schools have evolved since

Pennsylvania formally sanctioned them in 2002.

Cyber schools are all based on school instructors communicating over the internet with students at home working on their individual computers, using myriad programs designed to facilitate learning for every subject in the traditional school curriculum.

There's been a huge controversy over the quality of cyber schools, with many studies showing they are inferior to bricks and mortar schools.

But with the pandemic, distance learning is Pottstown's best option. Of course, it requires all students to have a computer

and an internet connection.

Preliminary surveys show up to 25 percent of Pottstown students lack a computer, and up to 10 percent of our families have no internet connection.

Pottstown High School students already have chromebooks, which are loaded with all the education programs their teachers use.

The district has about 700 chromebooks available at the middle school, with 500 more on order, scheduled to arrive in four to six weeks.

The district is working on a plan to hand them out to school families at the food distributions the district carries out every Wednesday.

Computer distribution to elementary school students will be phased in after that.

Teachers have phone numbers and email addresses for their students. They have "office hours" for email or phone communication. Teachers are reaching out to their students.

District superintendent Stephen Rodriguez is doing an excellent job keeping everyone informed on the district's website and Facebook page.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

ZOOM MEETING — Pottstown school directors conduct a virtual committee meeting live on the district's Facebook page April 2 using the Zoom platform. All meetings will be held virtually during the pandemic

