

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Better ... or worse?

Because of the pandemic, the Pottstown School District is receiving a one-time federal grant of \$9.7 million that must be spent by Sept. 30, 2022.

So as we spend this windfall, are we going to make things better ... or worse?

The most obvious action is making up for a substandard year of instruction because of the pandemic. Although the ability of the district to hold virtual classes in students' homes using Chromebooks was a godsend, no one thinks it was an adequate substitute for in-person schooling.

The district is offering seven weeks of free summer school for elementary and middle school students and five weeks for high school students to help them catch up. That's great.

Unfortunately, as of now, relatively few students have signed up: about 170 participants in the elementary schools, 100 at the middle school and perhaps 50 at the high school. That's less than 10 percent of the district's total enrollment.

It's disappointing more parents are not taking this opportunity to make up for lost time.

Although the world has changed dramatically in recent decades, school hours have not.

There are 183 school days in a year, each about seven hours long including lunch.

Fifty years ago, most school employees were teachers. But in recent decades, there has been a proliferation of specialists and support staff: special education teachers, psychologists, "mental health" professionals, therapists, clinicians and other specialists — plus dozens of aides

All these people are supposed to do their jobs in that same small window of seven hours in a day.

The more specialists we employ, the more disabilities they diagnose in students. In Pottstown, the percentage of special education students has grown sixfold since 1980.

Scheduling has become a nightmare of complexity. Shuffling kids around from one place to another creates an environment of fragmented responsibilities. When everyone is responsible for a student, no one

ends up being responsible.

My fear is we're going to hire yet more specialists and make the situation even worse.

The most important element in education is building relationships. To do that, we have to limit the number of students each teacher sees.

In self-contained classrooms, the teacher has the same students all year and teaches all subjects — reading, math, science, and social studies. Any teacher should be able to do that in grades 1 through 8.

With every student having a Chromebook, it's now easier than ever for a teacher to communicate with students and parents and to get to know them well.

Think this model can't work? Here's an extreme example.

A few years ago in Wyoming I met a young man named Bill Murphy. His entire public school education was completed in one building that housed just 90 students, encompassing grades K through 12 in a tiny town called Ten Sleep. There were seven students in his graduating class. He had the same English teacher for seven years (from sixth grade through his senior year) and most other teachers for multiple years.

To make the Ten Sleep School work, two grade levels are often combined in one classroom, such as first and second grade and third and fourth grade. At the secondary level, not only are grade levels combined, but a math teacher might be teaching trigonometry and calculus to different students in the same class.

Far from feeling deprived, Murphy told me he wouldn't have traded his school experience for any other. He was part of a tight-knit community. "We received much more individual attention than you could have received at a larger school," he said. He felt well prepared for the University of Wyoming (enrollment: 13,000) where he earned a BA in communications.

This week, a team of Pottstown educators will be meeting for three days with an \$80,000 consultant from California to brainstorm ways to improve education in Pottstown. Relationships should be Number 1.

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



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton