

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Virtues of virtual

Right or wrong, the Pottstown School District has decided to continue all-virtual education through the end of the third marking period in April.

Except for some special education pupils, all students will continue with their lessons using Chromebooks and the internet to receive assignments and interact with their teachers remotely.

We all know the cons: students are missing socialization with others; some students are disengaged; and others are participating but struggling with the virtual format.

When the school board voted last week to continue virtual, I asked the administration to gather comments from our teachers about what they've learned, now that they've had several months of experience with it.

We know that even after the pandemic ends, more and more work will be conducted virtually, both in education and the business world. We'd better learn to master it.

Traditionally, school systems have comprised a formal structure of teachers and students in physical classrooms engaged in a progressive curriculum that begins at age four or five and continues through high school, college and even graduate school.

But last year, when the district adopted Google's G-Suite, where everything is cloud-based, all our teachers had to learn a brand new system, on their own, remotely. No classroom courses, no instructor standing in front of the class and lecturing.

It was an broadening experience for our staff, and now we're asking our kids to do the same thing.

Ironically, our teachers are in some ways in closer contact with their students' lives now than before.

Last summer, some of our most conscientious teachers visited the homes of their students — masked and keeping their distance — to make human contact and deliver school supplies.

Because 85 percent of our professional staff don't live in Pottstown, it was the first time many teachers ever experienced the neighborhoods where our students live.

And now that our teachers are seeing their kids in their homes, through their Chromebook screens, they have a much better appreciation of our kids' home lives. In some homes, the TV is on all the time. Siblings, dogs and adults may wander in and out of the picture.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Pre-pandemic, teacher-parent contact was limited, usually only at parent-teacher conferences. But now a parent can lean right into the screen during sessions to interact with the teacher.

Teachers also have daily "office hours" to have one-on-one chats with stu-

dents.

Teachers and most students have mastered screen-sharing technologies for words, graphs, photos and videos. A cornucopia of information is available to everyone.

Lessons are recorded so students can go over them time and again if they need to.

Disruptive students used to be a significant problem, especially in the middle school. Not this year, when teachers have the ability to turn off any student's microphone.

In the classroom, many students used to shy away from participation for fear of asking a dumb question or giving the wrong answer.

Through the chat function, students can communicate with their teachers privately without the other students knowing what they asked or answered.

Because students and teachers can participate from anywhere, teachers can work from home or from school. Students can be anywhere as well. One student checked in from Manhattan, another from Florida. Students have been known to participate from cars while a parent is driving them somewhere.

For more than a century, students attended the physical public school where they lived. Charter schools came along and students could attend those no matter where they lived — if they could get there. With cyber schools, you can get to school directly from your home using a computer, even from a different state.

I'll be interested in our teachers' take on what all this means for public education.