

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Big Brother wants plans

Pennsylvania's 500 school districts have a Big Brother.

Big Brother is also known as the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

The Department, also known as PDE, is interested in every aspect of local school district activities. Thanks to the computer and the internet, it's easier than ever for PDE to impose mandates and require documentation to show they're being carried out.

In fact, Pottstown and other school districts must upload 22 sets of data to the PDE every year.

Consider testing. The Department has a set of standardized tests — the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) — that students must take each year. Districts must keep track of each student's test scores from year to year, in every subject, to measure academic progress. The district must also report to PDE how much of the student's school day is spent with each teacher, so we know which teacher to blame if Noah or Emma is not progressing sufficiently in reading or math or some other subject.

Curiously, however, there is one aspect of public education that is left to each school district's discretion.

Because of the pandemic, some districts are providing a totally virtual education this year.

Others are doing a hybrid system, with students receiving some instruction remotely via computer at home but also spending some time in school for in-person instruction.

Yet other districts are teaching normally, with all students coming to school as in any other school year.

No matter which option is chosen, some parents will be very unhappy.

Therefore, PDE has advised districts: You are better able at the local level to make that decision. But you must submit a plan for our approval.

The Department of Education is, in fact, particularly insistent on plans

of all sorts. Pottstown's plans include:

- District-wide Special Education Plan.
 - Comprehensive Guidance Plan.
 - Cultural Proficiency and Diversity Plan.
 - Individual School Improvement Plan. (Sometimes more than one.)
 - School Security Plan.
- We're told that preparing these plans, and conducting in-service sessions to go over them with teachers and staff, are a valuable use of time and money.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

At the Pottstown School Board's curriculum committee meeting last week, board members were briefed on a new district-wide Comprehensive Plan that must be completed and submitted to PDE by March of 2022.

The Comprehensive Plan, which will likely run more than 100 pages, is supposed to align and synthesize the district's numerous other plans and set goals for the coming years.

Although PDE wants this plan to be clear and accessible to all, it must be submitted in a specific format to fit PDE's "Future Ready Comprehensive Planning Portal."

School district administrators suggest that we hire a consultant who knows how to meet PDE's plan requirements. The recommended consultant, Performance Fact, Inc., at a cost of \$79,690, will facilitate a seven-phase process to

help Pottstown determine areas of focus and priority, strategies, and outcome measures.

Your taxpayer dollars at work!

As much as I want to support our administration, I find this one hard to swallow.

One thing is clear. With each passing year, public education has become more bureaucratic, cumbersome, and costly, with very little to show for it.

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

