

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The Myth

There's a myth that underlies discussion about Pennsylvania school districts serving low income populations.

The myth is that K-12 schools alone can pull substantial numbers of students out of poverty, if they just spend enough money.

Consider the chart, below.

Many people may be surprised that Pittsburgh is a relatively wealthy school district.

And it is way *overfunded* by the state. It spends \$25,500 per pupil, more than only a handful of districts in Pennsylvania. Because Pittsburgh is home to a lot of foundations, it can also offer the "Pittsburgh Promise": up to \$5,000 per year for four years to pay the college costs of Pittsburgh high school graduates.

Yet almost 40 per cent of Pittsburgh students drop out of school before graduating and almost 50 percent score below proficient on standardized tests.

How can this be?

Incompetence? Indifference? Not likely. Because Pittsburgh has so many wealthy foundations, the Pittsburgh School District is one of the most closely watched and informed in the state.

The simple fact is, schools can't do it all. In a famous 1964 study, educational sociologist James Cole-

man found that the social and educational backgrounds of students, not the quality of school facilities or class size, were the key factors in student achievement.

That's still true today, despite massive increases in school spending over the last 50 years (about triple the rate of inflation in Pottstown).

Motivated students do very well in Pottstown. In recent years, we've had graduates accepted at Yale, Penn, U.S. Naval Academy, Duke, Haverford, and the University of Virginia.

But many Pottstown students are not doing well academically.

Up to the 1950s, urban school districts like Pottstown were among the most desirable in the state.

But as the middle class and affluent migrated to the suburbs, poor and minority students became more isolated in cities and towns. Upward mobility declined dramatically.

What low income students need more than anything is to grow up in neighborhoods with a preponderance of middle class families.

But now that we've segregated poor kids, we say that K-12 schools alone can lift them out of poverty.

They haven't in the past, and they won't, no matter how much we spend.

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

School districts by wealth and need

School District	Percent students from low-income families	Wealth, ranked out of 500 districts	Local tax effort, ranked out of 500 districts	Spending per pupil	Spending, ranked out of 500 districts
Pottstown	72.5%	421	7	\$18,419	165
Pottsgrove	37.3%	207	26	\$19,773	109
Boyertown	24.4%	123	208	\$16,004	326
Daniel Boone	23.7%	215	49	\$19,839	106
O. J. Roberts	18.2%	61	83	\$18,714	149
Spring-Ford	16.9%	38	256	\$18,881	143
Perk. Valley	15.6%	88	74	\$18,740	148
Philadelphia	91.4%	432	94	\$16,067	319
Pittsburgh	69.5%	45	297	\$25,460	13