

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The academic impact of schools

Ever since public schools were created in the early 1800s, critics have decried their failures and touted the need for reform.

In my generation, the blockbuster call to arms was the 1983 U.S. Department of Education report, *A Nation at Risk*, which famously declared that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

Today, the kindergartners of 1983 are in their early 40s, and I’m happy to report the Republic still stands.

The most misguided educational reform in our era was the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* with the chimerical goal of making all children proficient in reading and math by the year 2014.

It didn’t happen, of course, and *No Child Left Behind* was replaced in 2015 by more “wishful thinking” legislation, the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015*.

Here in Pottstown, the school district is putting together another three-year Comprehensive Plan, required by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, to replace our current Comprehensive Plan, which runs through June 2022.

The district has hired Performance Fact, Inc., headed by Mutiu Fagbayi, to guide us through the planning process for a fee of \$79,790.

Fagbayi has worked in many Pennsylvania school districts, starting with the Lancaster City School District in 1998.

In 1999, after a year of discussion, Lancaster adopted a plan with many ambitious goals. For example, at the time the plan was approved, just two in 10 students were meeting or exceeding “rigorous learning standards in core subjects”. The plan aimed to raise that level to nine of 10 students by 2004.

Here’s how Lancaster subsequently fared, according to the most recent district-wide PSSA test results available:

The scores are mixed, but nowhere near the soaring goal of the 1999 plan. Some years, half of Lancaster students tested below proficient, and results did not improve as time went by.

Should we be surprised?

As much as Americans are loathe to admit it, research shows that schools have only a modest effect on the academic performance of their students. As the eminent educational sociologist, James Coleman,



Commentary by
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reported in a famous 1964 study, “the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.”

The reason Lower Merion students test far better than Pottstown students is not the schools, the teachers, or the curriculum. It’s the student demographic.

As long as conventional academic performance is the metric for judging public school districts, many of them — especially those with a predominately low-income student population — will fail.

The problem is not the schools, but the inability of the Pennsylvania Department of Education to value and nurture anything that can’t be measured on a standardized test.

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

Lancaster School District — Reading and language arts										
YEAR	2016	2015	2014	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
Advanced	7.3%	7%	5.6%	16.1%	15.6%	16.4%	17%	17.4%	15.3%	15.2%
Proficient	30.6%	30.2%	31.7%	31.7%	32.4%	32.4%	32%	30.3%	33.2%	30.6%
Basic	43%	39.3%	40.1%	21.9%	20.9%	21.2%	21.7%	22.4%	21.8%	22%
Below Basic	19%	23.6%	22.9%	30.3%	31.2%	30%	29.5%	29.8%	29.7%	32.2%
Lancaster School District — Mathematics										
Advanced	6.6%	7%	6.2%	27.4%	26.95	27.3%	27%	24.4%	25.7%	22.3%
Proficient	16.1%	16.4%	16.4%	31.4%	29.8%	28.95	28.7%	29.3%	26.9%	30.9%
Basic	28.9%	26.4%	33%	18.4%	18.9%	19.5%	19.3%	21.4%	18.6%	20.4%
Below Basic	48.4%	50.2%	44.4%	22.8%	24.4%	24.3%	25.2%	24.8%	26.1%	26.4%

* 2013 test results were not available.