

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Pandemic is changing paradigms

The last day of school is only a week away, and Pottstown administrators are still not sure what classes will look like next fall.

Right now, some sort of hybrid system seems most likely, although in-person classes will be conducted five days a week.

Early returns from a school district survey of parents indicates at least 10 percent of families will want to keep their children home for continued virtual learning.

That doesn't make it easy to plan.

The pandemic has greatly accelerated a paradigm shift in how we live and work.

A paradigm is a generally accepted way of doing things. Prior to World War 2, for example, Pottstown was largely self-contained, with most residents working and shopping within the borough.

In the 1950s, the paradigm changed. Almost everyone could now afford a car, and with construction of highways and other new infrastructure in outlying areas (at public expense), people could live farther apart and drive to work and to shop. Living patterns became decentralized and car-dependent.

The resulting exodus of the middle class and affluent to newly developing suburbs led to declining downtowns and the increasing isolation of poor and minority families in older towns like Pottstown.

Now, with the internet and virtual platforms like Skype and Zoom, the American lifestyle paradigm is changing once again.

When shopping, consumers can access a much greater variety of products on websites like Amazon than they can find in any single store. Purchases can be delivered to their door in a day or two.

As a result, internet commerce is skyrocketing, and bricks and mortar stores are declining.

When the pandemic hit, businesses were forced to conduct their operations with employees working from home. Everyone learned how to use Zoom and other virtual meeting and work sharing platforms.

As it turned out, a lot of people liked it. They found it much more convenient than commuting, and it

was easier to schedule office work to accommodate their home life. They felt more productive.

Nearly half of employees surveyed by Gallup earlier this year said they'd prefer working from home even after the pandemic ends.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Companies recognize that working remotely doesn't substitute for the personal contact and easy availability that promotes collaboration.

Still, in the competition for employees, companies have to accommodate people's changing expectations about work. They also like the idea of saving rent from

downsizing their offices.

Teaching is a different matter.

The nation's two largest teachers unions have called for a return to full-time in-class schooling next fall.

Pottstown educators would also prefer all students to be in class every day. Building relationships and holding group discussions are much more effective in person.

But if the district doesn't make allowance for students who want to learn from home, we may lose them to cyber charter schools.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has had some positive consequences.

All Pottstown students except kindergartners and preschoolers now have Chromebooks. The district has set up hot spots throughout town for students who don't have an internet connection at home.

A Chromebook, which uses Google's G-suite of learning tools, is an Open Sesame of learning. Virtually all organized knowledge is now available to our students in their homes.

Last year, when the district adopted G-Suite, where everything is cloud-based, all our teachers had to learn a brand new system.

Everyone was forced to move out of their comfort zone. Technology that might have taken years to adopt took just weeks.

Students and parents can now communicate virtually with their teachers, on Zoom or Google Meet, and all classwork can be done on the Chromebooks and shared with teachers remotely.

Now, as never before, we have the opportunity to rethink how our schools can function in the future.