

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Too much specialization

There are two major trends in public schools during the last 50 years.

First, rising costs: School district spending has increased at more than twice the rate of inflation.

Second, there's been a huge increase in specialization.

It used to be teachers were certified in grades K-6 (for all major subjects) and 7-12 in a specialty like English or math.

Special education teachers had separate certifications (which now are broken down into sub-specialties).

Certifications were added for middle school (originally, grades 6-9, but now for grades 4-8).

Then K-6 certifications were dropped in favor of pre-K-3 (now pre-K-4 certifications).

While English and mathematics teachers still only need one certification for grades 7-12, science has been subdivided into specialties (biology, chemistry, earth and space, physics, and general science).

Then there are a host of other certifications outside the major subjects — not just art and music, but reading, computer science, communications, and a host of others.

This is just for teachers. There are also psychologists, guidance counselors, physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech clinicians.

Parochial schools don't have to worry about state certifications. The only question is whether the teacher is competent to teach his or her subject. And parochial schools are de-

servedly known for their academic rigor.

The theory in public schools, of course, is that specialists will be much better at handling one particular topic because they know so much about it.

(Of course, there is a world of difference between knowing something and being able to teach it to others.)

The reality is much different. The most important aspect of education (or almost every other enterprise) is relationship-building.

On Tuesday, we discussed the work of Ruby Payne, a former teacher and principal

who has researched ways public schools can help bring children out of poverty.

Teachers must do more than teach subject matter, she says. They must be role models. They must show students what they must do if they want to join the middle class.

But students today see so many different adults during the school day they rarely get to know any of them very well.

Likewise, adults with a big caseload of students don't have the time and inclination to make a personal investment in their welfare.

Payne writes: "When students who have been in poverty (and have successfully made it into the middle class) are asked how they made the journey, the answer nine times out of ten has to do with a relationship — a teacher, counselor or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals."

Payne suggests schools should be organized to allow teachers to stay with the same students for two or more years, so they have time to get to know both their students and their parents very well.

"The key to achievement for students from poverty is in creating relationships," she says.

This is also much more rewarding and less stressful for teachers.

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



STUDENTS ARE NOT ROBOTS to be programmed with enough English, math, science and social studies to pass standardized tests and graduate from high school. Relationship-building is vital to helping students, especially disadvantaged children, to succeed in school.