

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

School choice: \$8 million or \$39+ million

For more than ten years, the Pottstown School Board has been grappling with the fate of its five neighborhood elementary schools.

Should it create a new campus of three new buildings and close all five existing schools? Should it enlarge some and close others? Several plans, costing from \$40 million to \$53 million, were drawn up at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars and then discarded. Meanwhile, the district has acquired 23 modular classrooms (trailers) scattered outside the five schools on playgrounds and parking lots. Many of these modulares were acquired with the assumption that existing schools would need to be vacated for months at a time for renovations. The modulares would house students temporarily during those times.

The least expensive option to renovate the elementary schools, proposed by architects Crabtree Rohrbaugh, called for enlarging three schools and closing two others at a cost of \$39 million. This option required increasing class sizes.

Last week, the district's newly formed Neighborhood Schools Committee discussed an option that is far less costly than any option considered thus far.

For about \$8 million — less than a quarter of the lowest previous estimate — the district should be able to extend the life of its five elementary schools for at least 20 years and completely replace their inefficient heating and lighting systems.

Last December, the school district contracted with architect Ellis Schmidlapp to evaluate Pottstown's elementary schools.

Schmidlapp reported that all the schools have good roofs and masonry walls, with minor brick pointing needed at the Rupert and Barth schools.

Three schools — Barth, Lincoln, and Franklin — already have modern windows. Two schools, Rupert and Edgewood, need replacement windows.

None of the schools meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, the schools do not need to comply with ADA codes unless the district builds additions or starts moving interior walls around.

Such upgrades as new windows, lighting fixtures, plumbing, and heating and cooling systems would not require ADA compliance.

Certainly, at least one school should be ADA compliant if at all possible. Because it has only one floor, Edgewood is the best candidate. To be ADA compliant, Edgewood would need new doors and plumbing fixtures in its bathrooms.

That leaves one major issue: Replacing the inefficient energy systems at our five elementary schools.

At present, the schools are heated using boilers which feed steam or hot water to radiators in each room. The systems are old and need replacement.

A much better technology — environmentally friendly and energy efficient — is being increasingly used in schools

across the country. Called geothermal heat pumps, the system relies on the moderate temperatures found underground. By sinking wells, the system can withdraw heat from the earth during the winter or pump heat into the earth during the summer. The wells can be located under playgrounds, parking lots, or open fields adjacent to the schools.

Such systems can provide heating and air conditioning at our five elementary schools at lower operating costs than any other system — without burning fossil fuels like conventional mechanical systems. Over 20 years, with rising energy costs, these systems will likely pay for themselves.

Since the ducts for these systems will be installed above the ceilings, there will be room to upgrade the schools' technology wiring, as well.

Other hardware changes that pay for themselves over time would include changing the inefficient light fixtures in all the schools and replacing the existing plumbing fixtures with low flow toilets and faucets.

With the eleventh highest taxes in Pennsylvania, the Pottstown School District cannot afford to build new space it doesn't really need. But upgrading our energy systems is a sound investment for the future.

This column expresses the personal views of Tom Hylton and does not represent the views of any public or private organization with which he is affiliated.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Summary

For about \$8 million, the Pottstown School District should be able to renovate its schools to be energy efficient and provide a good learning environment for years to come. As energy costs increase, these upgrades will eventually pay for themselves.