Positive feeling about Pottstown schools

Every school board in the Pottstown area spends tens of millions of taxpayer dollars annually. But do board members really know what’s going on in the classroom?

After five years on the Pottstown School Board, I decided I would try to find out. With the blessings of superintendent Jeff Sparagana, I started last October, spending nearly 150 hours in our schools over a six-month period, visiting 179 classes in grades pre-K through 12. I told the principals the day before I visited their schools, but otherwise felt free to roam the halls and walk in and out of classrooms, unannounced, sitting in the back and trying to be unobtrusive.

I did not visit any classroom more than once, and I did not discuss with anyone what I had seen except in general terms. School boards set policy. It’s not our role to evaluate teachers or principals, and certainly not to gossip about what this or that person did or didn’t do.

My overall impression was overwhelmingly positive — especially concerning our students, whom I found to be polite and good-natured. They are nice to each other. If there was any bullying, I missed it.

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Perhaps the best term to describe Pottstown High School is laid back. The hallways were orderly. Some students were industrious, and some seemed indifferent, but no one was disruptive. District-wide, I saw only a couple of unhappy kids, best described as “sullen, but not mutinous.”

I didn’t feel there was any lack of rigor or extra help for motivated students who want to achieve. The high school math and science students, certainly, left me in the dust.

I saw a lot of competent teaching at all grade levels. The middle school kids were the most challenging, and I was pleased at how professionally the teachers handled their classes. Positive atmosphere. No threats, no screaming. No unending teacher talk. The kids were good at working on their own in small groups.

The elementary school classes were a joy to behold. The younger they are, the more excited pupils are to be in school and learn. They love to participate, and they want to please.

But they are exhausting. There is no down time in the primary grades. Some kids find it very hard to sit still, but teachers were masterful at keeping kids focused and moving seamlessly from one lesson to another.

I have frequently written that the Pottstown School District is spending more than this community can afford, and I haven’t changed my mind about that. There are many inefficiencies, and I saw ways we can do more with less. But the backbone of quality schools is the regular classroom teacher, and in that we excel.