

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Sustainable schools

As we look to the future of Pottstown, it is clear local government spending is unsustainable, particularly the school district.

We are in the bottom fifth of Pennsylvania school districts in wealth and the top third in spending.

Pottstown now has the third highest taxes of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts. We face a potential \$1.5 million deficit next year, and our tax base continues to decline.

Recently, I published a sampling of Pottstown's state test scores, which show no clear pattern over the last decade. I suspect we could go back 40 years and find no major difference in how our students have achieved.

Yet we have added about 75 percent more employees per student than we had 40 years ago — mostly for classroom aides, special education teachers, psychologists and therapists — and spending has increased at more than double the rate of inflation.

Last year, the school board set aside time at its meetings in February, March and April for cost-cutting suggestions. No one had any.

Let me make a few.

First, our students deal with far too many different adults during the school day.

We need to focus on building relationships between teachers, students, and parents. That takes time.

Therefore, we should consider having our elementary school teachers keep the same students for multiple years.

In York City schools, teachers

have the same students in grades 1 and 2; grades 3 and 4, grades 5 and 6, and next year, grades 7 and 8.

This gives teachers and students much more time to know each other. It encourages teachers to invest time in knowing the students' parents and families.

It cuts down on bureaucracy and gives parents just one contact person with the school — the classroom teacher.

Twenty-five years ago, we had 18 classroom aides district-wide. Now we have 73 aides, some of whom receive more than \$40,000 in salaries and benefits.

In visiting our classrooms, I've wondered about the necessity of all these aides. Sometimes, having two or three adults in the classroom can be a distraction rather than a help.

On Tuesday, I discussed using self-contained classrooms at the middle school instead of having students change classes for different subjects. This is more efficient and much better for building relationships.

The high school moved to block scheduling in the mid 1990s. Each day, teachers have three 85-minute classes and an 85-minute planning period. Considering some teachers earn more than \$100,000 in salary and benefits, we have to ask if there is a more efficient way to use precious teacher time.

For as long as I can remember, the solution to every problem has been spending more money. Now there's no more money to spend.

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

Selected Pottstown School District statistics	
Pottstown taxation rank of 500 Pennsylvania school districts	3rd
Per pupil cost, 1974-1975	\$1,584
Per pupil cost, 2015-2016	\$18,387 (2.4 x inflation rate)
1977-1978 employee/student ratio	1 employee per 9.5 students
2015-2016 employee/student ratio	1 employee per 5.7 students
Pottstown wealth rank of 500 school districts	402 (bottom fifth)
Pottstown spending rank of 500 school districts	156 (top third)
Pottstown tax base, 1998	\$816,841,351
Pottstown tax base, 2017	\$803,730,299