

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Schools can't do it all

Last week, we pointed out that local government spends about \$100 million annually in Pottstown, with 62 percent allocated to the Pottstown School District.

Education is vitally important, and our school district is proud that it goes above and beyond, including community outreach programs, after-school programs, and pre-kindergarten programs.

But we're kidding ourselves if we think schools alone are going to transform Pottstown. They aren't. Schools are a reflection of the demographics of their community.

Consider the Farrell Area School District, which serves a small steel-making town in northwest Pennsylvania, along the Ohio border. The city of Farrell is one of the state's most economically depressed communities.

In 1983, a new superintendent, John Sava, took over with the goal of revolutionizing public education in a classic high-poverty district.

He visited homes and churches, and set up community meetings, to describe his vision of a district that provided "womb to tomb" services to the community, starting with the parents of newborns.

Farrell schools opened early and closed late. The district housed a health clinic for people of all ages. Day care was provided in all schools with fees based on the parent's ability to pay.

Sava worked to get parents and grandparents involved in the schools, "promoting the family as the child's first and best teacher."

The district even employed a "parent educator" who visited families of children under 3 to mentor good parenting.

The state Department of Education touted Farrell as the school system of the future. Said one Yale University child development expert,

"Farrell is the closest model we can find of what we want schools of the 21st century to be."

Yet two decades after Sava retired in 1997 to widespread acclaim, Farrell remains the fifth poorest school district in



Commentary by
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the state.

Test scores at Farrell High School were so low that recently the department of Education actually considered closing the school and reassigning its students to adjacent districts.

The fact is, there is no high-poverty district in Pennsylvania that has succeeded over time in uplifting substantial numbers of children from poverty. There are individual successes, of course, which keep our morale up, but no transformations.

Pottstown property owners already pay the third highest school taxes in Pennsylvania, and we have a declining tax base. Instead of spending more money on schools, perhaps we should try to attract productive residents and businesses by lowering taxes.

In many ways, Pottstown is an ideal community. Because of its closely connected mixture of houses, offices and stores, which can be reached by walking, bicycling, and short car and bus trips, Pottstown is more environmentally friendly than the surrounding suburbs and semi-rural areas.

But appearances count, and we need to start investing in street tree maintenance, sidewalk remediation, road resurfacing and the rehabilitation of our buildings — things people see when they visit our town.

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.



HEAD START CLASS IN FARRELL AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT — Thirty-five years after embarking on perhaps the most comprehensive public school outreach program in Pennsylvania, Farrell remains mired in poverty.