

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Middle school woes

Exactly a year ago, March 2017, teachers and parents complained of growing discipline problems at Pottstown Middle School.

Community members were invited to meetings at the middle school. Bathroom and hall monitors were added. Cafeteria seats were assigned. A dean of students was hired — all to improve student behavior.

Last summer, a new principal and assistant principal were hired.

But two weeks ago, more than 25 parents and students stood before the Pottstown School Board to lament the same problems.

Now the district is hiring a “safety and security agent” to be inside and outside the building during school hours. More behavioral and mental health services will be provided.

School structure

Last year, as one of nine school board members, I suggested the middle school should be restructured.

When the fifth grade first moved to the middle school in the 2013-2014 school year, fifth grade classes were self-contained (one teacher teaching all major subjects); the sixth graders were taught by a team of two teachers; and the seventh and eighth graders had teams of four teachers.

By 2016-2017, for whatever reason, team teaching was eliminated. Therefore, it really didn’t surprise me that discipline problems increased.

We turned our middle school into a junior high school, and our kids are not ready for that.

Two different school models

Historically, elementary schools contained grades kindergarten through eighth. Most Catholic grade schools still do. And many urban school districts, including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and York, have returned to that model.

Students over subjects

In the classic elementary school with self-contained classrooms, the teacher has the same 25 to 30 students all year and teaches all subjects — reading, math, science, social studies.

At the high school level, each teacher specializes in one subject and sees a much higher number of stu-

dents over two semesters, well over 100.

Elementary school teachers, therefore, have a much better opportunity to know the whole child, while secondary teachers are more likely to see students as vessels to be filled with a prescribed amount of knowledge in math or English.

Pottstown demographics

In Pottstown, where our student body is overwhelmingly low and moderate income, knowing the whole child is more important than in districts that primarily serve middle class families.

Some of our parents struggled when they were students.

And some families are dysfunctional and develop a whole host of destructive behaviors that children carry with them into the classroom.

In Pottstown, therefore, we need to put the individual student first and subjects second. Building relationships is more important than anything else, and to do that, we have to limit the number of students each teacher sees.

Here’s what I suggested last year:

Teacher certification

Our current fifth and sixth grade teachers are certified to teach all major subjects at both grade levels.

Therefore, our fifth and sixth grades should be self-contained, and our teachers should keep the same students for both years, moving from fifth to sixth grade with their students.

This will give teachers, parents, and students an optimal amount of time to build relationships. Every child is different, and it takes time for a teacher to understand and treat each one individually. It takes time for a group of children to gel into a classroom “family.”

When students are leaving the classroom for lunch, or art and music classes — even dismissal — their teacher should go with them.

Team teaching

Team teaching should be reintroduced for seventh and eighth grades, and the teams should keep the same group of students for both years.

These suggestions were not taken last year, and I’m no longer on the Pottstown School Board. But I still think they have merit.



Commentary by
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