

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## The rise of charter schools

Rallies were held simultaneously Dec. 5 at 17 school districts statewide to protest the way Pennsylvania funds its public schools. District officials called for full implementation of a "fair funding" formula developed to distribute state aid to districts according to their wealth and student demographics. Protesters also sought reforms in the way public charter schools are established and funded.

The Mercury has written copiously about "fair funding," and I've written quite a few columns about it myself.

So this week, let's look at charter schools.

A little history: In 1834, Pennsylvania became the first state in the nation to adopt a statewide public school system. Local municipalities were directed to establish school boards with the power to levy taxes to build and operate free public schools for children and youth living within their jurisdiction.

It's been the same ever since. Students attend free public schools based on where they live.

Therefore, if you live in Pottstown you can attend Pottstown schools, free. If you want to attend Pottsgrove schools, however, you would have to apply and pay tuition. To catch cheaters, highly desirable school districts often employ detectives to ensure students enrolling in their schools actually live in the district.

Of course, many parents choose homes based on the reputation of the local school district.

A century ago, cities and towns like Pottstown, Norristown, Reading and Allentown had residents spanning a wide range of income and education levels. City schools were comprehensive and highly desirable.

But as the middle class and affluent moved out into the townships starting in the 1950s, minorities and the poor became increasingly concentrated in cities and towns.

There is a high correlation between systemic poverty and low academic achievement, so it's not surprising that test scores and graduation rates declined in urban districts, which then became undesirable.

Meanwhile, parents have always had the option to send their children to private schools, which don't have a fixed attendance area and can be selective in

enrollment. But they charge tuition.

The status quo began to change in the 1980s. With the election of Ronald Reagan as president, conservative thinking started to influence public school policy.

Free market theorists questioned whether urban public schools could ever raise academic achievement.

Instead, they suggested, a new kind of school, freed from the bureaucracy and operated by outside groups, not government, were needed.

These schools would be funded with local tax dollars but not supervised by school districts.

They would provide a better education, at less cost, advocates said. And, through the magic of free market competition, they would also force public school districts to improve. Everyone would benefit.

Thus the charter school was born.

**Thursday: charter schools' impact on local communities.**

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



Commentary by  
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**POTTSTOWN SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT Stephen Rodriguez argues for fair funding and charter school reform at a rally Dec. 5 at Pottstown High School. Rodriguez, who is president of the Pennsylvania League of Urban Schools, helped foster rallies statewide to campaign for reforms.**