

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Charters undermine communities

Since Pennsylvania passed a charter school law in 1997, about 175 charter schools have been established. Most are “bricks-and-mortar” schools, with physical buildings, like Renaissance Academy in Phoenixville. Fifteen are cyber-charter schools, which have no buildings or classrooms. Cyber-charter students work at home on their computers and receive instruction from teachers over the internet.

Charter school enrollment is based on the students who apply, not where they live, unlike regular public schools. If there are not enough slots in a given school for all applicants, a lottery is typically used to select students.

About 9 percent of Pennsylvania students — 141,000 — are enrolled in charter schools.

Charter schools are funded with payments from each student’s home district, based on how much a district spends on its own students. That means a student from the high-spending Lower Merion School District is going to bring a lot more dollars to a charter school than a student from a poor district like Reading.

As a result, there is no relationship between the amount of money charter schools receive and their actual cost to provide instruction.

Critics say this system makes no sense and wastes taxpayer dollars. Charter schools fail to meet the same educational standards as public schools, they say, and lack accountability for poor results.

Test scores show charter schools, with some exceptions, perform no better and often worse than public schools.

My reservations about charter schools go beyond those concerns. As one who believes in traditional towns that house people of all ages, races and incomes, with walkable neighborhood schools, I oppose charter schools because they undermine struggling communities like Pottstown, Norristown and Reading.

It’s already bad enough that the middle class and affluent have segregated themselves from the poor by moving into low density suburbs and semi-rural areas that are too expensive for low income families to follow.

Now, thanks to charter schools,

motivated parents in urban areas can remove their children from regular public schools, further concentrating the poor left behind.

No school district can function without at least a core of students who come from middle class families and can serve as stabilizers and role models.

As educational historian Diane Ravitch has written:

“Do we need neighborhood schools? I believe we do.

“The neighborhood school is the place where parents meet to share concerns about their children and the place where they learn

the practice of democracy. They create a sense of community among strangers.

“As we lose neighborhood public schools, we lose the one local institution where people congregate and mobilize to solve local problems, where individuals learn to speak up and debate and engage in democratic give-and-take with their neighbors. For more than a century, they have been an essential element of our democratic institutions. ...

“Business leaders like the idea of turning the schools into a marketplace where the consumer is king. But the problem with the marketplace is that it dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers. Going to school is not the same as going shopping.

“Parents should be able to take their child to the neighborhood public school as a matter of course and expect that it has well-educated teachers and a sound educational program.

“The market serves us well when we want to buy a pair of shoes or a new car or a can of paint; we can shop around for the best value or the style we like. The market is not the best way to deliver public services.

“Just as every neighborhood should have a reliable fire station, every neighborhood should have a reliable public school.”

It can’t always be every person for himself. We need to share some things as a community.

*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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