

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Reforming teachers' salary schedule

On Thursday night, the Pottstown School Board will meet in executive session to discuss contract negotiations with the Federation of Pottstown Teachers.

The current three-year contract expires August 31 of this year. Previous to the last contract, teachers at the top of the salary schedule earned about 80 percent more than those in their first few years of teaching — a huge difference.

The 2016-2019 contract currently in force began an eight-year process of boosting salaries evenly over a 13-step schedule instead of giving “balloon payments” to those at the top.

I hope we can continue that process. But the current contract has increased total spending on teacher salaries by a cumulative \$1.4 million.

With a steadily declining tax base — including the loss of \$1 million in annual revenue when the Pottstown Hospital was removed from the tax rolls last year — we can't afford the kind of generous contract that Pottsgrove recently gave its teachers, which will boost costs \$2 million over the next three years.

In fact, as we reduce the number of steps in the salary schedule, we should continue freezes at the top.

Moreover, there's a long-established practice in teacher salary schedules across the state that Pottstown needs to phase out: extra pay for teachers with master's degrees and graduate credits.

Research has shown that in K-12 schools, having a master's degree makes no difference in the ability to teach.

But it makes a huge difference in cost to the taxpayer.

Here's a personal example: My wife graduated in 1970 from Kutztown State College with a bachelor's degree in education, certified in secondary

English.

There was a surplus of teachers in those days — especially in English — so my wife taught three years in Catholic elementary schools as she earned a master's degree in elementary education from Lehigh University.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Then, from 1973 until she retired 35 years later, she taught in Pottstown schools with many colleagues who only had bachelor's degrees.

She didn't see a difference in teaching ability, but she did see an enormous difference in her paycheck.

In this year's teacher contract, for example, the top salary for a bachelor's degree is \$60,000, while the salary for a master's degree +30 credits is \$92,000 — more than 50 percent higher!

This is why many teachers earn master's degrees shortly before retirement — to boost their pension, which is based on the average salary of the last three years of teaching.

But there *is* one element that deserves a bonus in the salary schedule: extra certifications, especially in special education.

Research shows teachers with certifications aren't necessarily any better than those without them, but the state has very specific certification requirements that school districts must meet.

With the number of special education students skyrocketing, it helps to have as many dual-certified teachers as possible, with special education as the second certification.

Middle and high school teachers with extra certifications in subjects like math, social studies, various science disciplines, language arts, and reading specialist give administrators a lot more flexibility in staff placement. Extra certifications are worth a premium.

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



Federation teachers wear lime T-shirts at a 2016 Pottstown School Board meeting to show solidarity during the last round of negotiations.