

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Schools closed in fall of 1918

Last week, the Montgomery County Board of Health ordered all K-12 schools in the county, including private schools, to close for two weeks from Nov. 23 to Dec. 6 because of the coronavirus.

Of course, virtual education, which most of the schools are doing anyway, will continue.

Virtual education was not an option in October 1918, when the Pottstown Board of Health, following state guidance, ordered the closure of all Pottstown schools from Oct. 4 until Nov. 4. Even The Hill School closed and sent all its students home.

As bad as it is, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, which so far has killed nearly 250,000 Americans, has reached only a fraction of those who died in the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1919.

From the spring of 1918 through the spring of 1919, about 675,000 Americans died. Unlike the current pandemic, which mostly kills the elderly, the Spanish flu mostly killed people in their prime of life.

There are three times as many Americans today as there were in 1919, so an equivalent number of deaths today would be more than 2 million.

Philadelphia was one of the country's hotspots. A Liberty Loan Drive parade on Sept. 28, 1918, drew 200,000 onlookers to Broad Street, which turned out to be one of the greatest super-spreader events of the century.

About 47,000 people in Philadelphia were infected and nearly 12,000 died in October 1918 alone.

Strange to say, except for one day in October, the pandemic wasn't front page news in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Instead, the headlines were all about the fighting in Europe, where the Allies were closing in on Germany (the Armistice was signed Nov. 11, ending World War I).

Only when the Pennsylvania Commissioner of Health ordered all Philadelphia schools closed as

of Oct. 4 (after the city had recorded 75,000 cases since Sept. 11) did the pandemic make the front page. After that, the pandemic was relegated to inside pages.

The *Inquirer* published a helpful editorial, which could have been written by Donald Trump:

"What are they trying to do, scare everybody to death? The fear of influenza is creating a panic, an unreasonable panic that will be promoted, we suspect, by the drastic commands of the authorities. ... Steer clear of it, therefore and talk of cheerful things – of health, for instance, instead of disease."

The October headlines in the *Pottstown Daily Ledger* were not so cheerful, however: "More Deaths from Influenza";

"Another Day of Funerals"; "Today's Quota of Funerals"; "Funeral List Stays Full." The *Daily Ledger* did not tally the number of dead, although authorities in Philadelphia reported that 11,811 people were killed by the flu as of October 31.

October 1918 deaths in Philadelphia	
Under 1 year	120
1 to 5	600
6 to 10	1,080
11 to 20	2,280
21 to 30	3,720
31 to 40	2,280
41 to 50	1,080
51 to 60	600
60 and older	120



Commentary by
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THE SPANISH FLU hit Pottstown hard in the fall of 1918. All schools and churches were ordered closed from October 4 to November 4. On Oct. 3 alone the *Pottstown Daily Ledger* reported 700 cases of the "Grippe."