

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Been there. Done that.

While Pottstown teachers, students and parents are scrambling to adapt to distance learning, others have been doing it for years.

Eddie Schutt started out as a typical student at Pottstown's Lincoln Elementary School, but after fourth grade his parents enrolled him in the Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School.

He continued his virtual education for eight years until 2018, when he received his graduate diploma at a commencement ceremony in a Harrisburg hotel.

Two weeks later, he enrolled in an in-person course at Automotive Training Center in Exton. After earning his automotive degree, he began working as a service technician for M&M Lube and Automotive Repair in Pottstown.

At first, moving to on-line learning from a regular classroom seemed overwhelming. The Schutts received a laptop computer, printer, student and teacher books and workbooks, but no one came in person to show them how to set anything up.

However, as they learned from other virtual school parents on Facebook, and communicated with teachers by phone and email, they gradually figured everything out.

The school paid for Eddie's internet connection and all his materials. In turn, the charter school billed the Pottstown School District for his tuition.

At first, Eddie's mother, Janet, set up a work station in his bedroom, but she soon realized she would need to be frequently involved in his projects — more like home schooling. She moved his laptop to the kitchen table.

As Eddie progressed into the higher grades, he needed less oversight.

Eddie started each school day with a computer program called Blackboard, similar to Google's Classroom (now used in Pottstown) which provided him with a daily update of school events and other information.

Blackboard listed the lessons Eddie had scheduled for the day and the estimated time it would take to complete each one. He could look at his schedule for the week and the entire school year.

Eddie also attended virtual class-

rooms using a computer program called Elluminate, similar to Google Meet. Just as a teacher writes lessons on a whiteboard in a real classroom, the teacher wrote lessons each student saw simultaneously on his computer. Students "raised their

hand" to answer questions by clicking on a mouse. The teacher called on students by activating his microphone so he could speak to the others.

Students could also push a button to speak, or type into a chat box.

Although there were scheduled classes during the week, Eddie also had

the option to take lessons on his own. His work was recorded on the computer at the end of each day, so teachers could monitor his progress.

Eddie took frequent assessment tests. If he didn't pass, he studied the material again. He could take as much time as he needed to learn the concept. On the other hand, if he mastered a concept, he could skip the lesson and move on.

Teachers had regular "office hours" when students could call, or they could email their teachers. Students could also have a private session with a teacher, looking at school work together on a shared screen.

Students got physical textbooks each year, related to on-line material they could use to take tests.

The teachers usually changed each year, but sometimes he would have the same teacher a few years later.

"Cyber schools are great for learning," Eddie said, "but not for socializing. It's hard to make friends just using a computer." Students could email each other and call on the phone. Not the same as in person.

The virtual school scheduled field trips every month where students and parents could meet one another and their teachers. But with students from all over the region, it was hard for everyone to attend.

Eddie liked his teachers and thought they did a great job.

Pottstown Public School students and teachers are now exploring what cyber schools have been doing for more than 15 years. We all have a lot to learn from them.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton