

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

It's all up in the air

It's hard to believe we are just five weeks away from the scheduled opening of Pottstown schools, and we still don't know what that will look like.

On Monday, superintendent Stephen Rodriguez laid out a dizzying array of in-school options in a one-hour presentation on the district's Facebook page.

The three main options:

1. Five days a week of school, but with a shortened school day, with lunch given to students to take home as they leave school.
2. A hybrid, with schools opened for a reduced number of students who would rotate with other groups of students daily or weekly.
3. Continuation of the virtual learning program the district conducted last spring.

However, the situation is so fluid, and guidelines apt to change so quickly, that whatever option is decided today may be moot tomorrow.

Two surveys of families and staff taken this summer found no consensus on full-time in-school, versus a hybrid system, versus remote learning at home.

A third survey for parents is scheduled this week.

The state has ordered that everyone wear face masks in school, something I would judge almost impossible to enforce in real-world schools.

If our schools open, all extraneous classroom furniture will be removed; tables normally used in the elementary schools will be removed; and all desks will face forward, six feet apart.

There will be two staff in each classroom, no more, no less.

Although few people thought last spring's virtual learning experiment was successful, the district expects to get much better at it this fall.

The district now has a Chromebook for every student in grades 1 through 12. All teachers have been trained in Google's G Suite, the district's platform for virtual learning.

The district already offers its own virtual learning academy, and 400 students have expressed interest in signing up.

I suspect Pottstown will lose some students to one of the state's fifteen cyber charter schools, which last year enrolled about 35,000 students statewide.

In the long run, as terrible as the pandemic has been for our families, it is forcing districts to speed up the use of virtual learning, which is here to stay no matter when the pandemic ends.

On Tuesday, the Pottsgrove School District announced it will offer two options for students: A hybrid in-school option and a stay-at-home option. As more districts announce their plans, peer pressure may compel other districts to adopt similar plans.

One virtue of a virtual learning program is certainty. You don't have to worry that teachers won't show up, or that schools will have to suddenly shut down because a number of students or teachers become infected.

All this misery might have been avoided if we had benefitted from coherent, science-based national leadership from the start.

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



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton



FALL SPORTS CONDITIONING — Pottstown football players go through voluntary conditioning exercises, above. Elaborate precautions have been taken: no more than 25 athletes participate at one time; no physical contact; masks are worn when kids are not working out; no locker rooms; students use only Grigg Field lavatories, one by one, which are cleaned and sanitized every half hour. Similar precautions will be more difficult to carry out inside school buildings.