

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Big changes in public education

This week commences the most unusual school year in the Pottstown School District's 182-year history: For the first time, education is being delivered remotely to students in their homes instead of physical school buildings.

Ever since 1834, Pennsylvania children and youth have had the right to attend free public schools based on where they live. (Pottstown set up its first schools in 1838).

Therefore, to attend Pottstown public schools, you only need to prove residency, even if you just moved in last week.

Meanwhile, parents have always had the option to send their children to private schools, which don't have a fixed attendance area and can be selective in enrollment. But they charge tuition.

A big change in public education began in 1997, when Pennsylvania legalized private non-profit charter schools, which can be located anywhere in Pennsylvania. Each student's tuition is charged to the school district where the student lives. Tuition is not based on the charter school's actual costs, but on how much the local public school district spends per pupil on its own students.

A second big change came in 2002, when cyber charter schools were authorized. Cybers provide virtual education over the internet using laptops. With no physical school, a student's education is entirely disconnected from where he or she lives.

But the school district where the

student resides still pays the tuition, which is exactly the same amount as a bricks and mortar charter school.

And while public schools are weighed down by an elaborate framework of rules and regulations, charters have no local oversight and very little from the state.



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton

Statewide, about 8.5 percent of Pennsylvania's 1.7 million students attend charter schools, including 35,000 cyber charter students.

But less than 5 percent of Pottstown students attend charters, either bricks and mortar schools, like Phoenixville's Renaissance Academy, or one of Pennsylvania's 15 cyber charter schools.

That may change with the pandemic, now that many school districts are only offering virtual education.

Pottstown operates its own in-house cyber school, and it will be interesting to see how many families sign up.

Last week, the Pottstown School Board asked the administration to update the figures in the chart, below, in September.

There are scores of bills in the legislature to address the inequities of charter schools. One, by our own Rep. Joe Ciresi, would allow school districts to refuse to pay tuition for any charter school outside its attendance area.

Another, offered by an Erie legislator, would require families to pay the full cost of a cyber charter school if their home district offers a cyber program equal in scope and content.

Perhaps one of them will pass.

<b>School-aged students in Pottstown Borough March 2020</b>	
Total school-aged children and youth living in Pottstown Borough	3943
Pottstown students in Pottstown schools (including special education)	3342
Pottstown in-house cyber students	41
Pottstown special education students placed in private schools	137
Pottstown students in bricks and mortar charter schools (reg. education)	42
Pottstown students in cyber charter schools (reg. education)	100
Pottstown special education students in bricks and mortar charter schools	8
Pottstown special education students in cyber charter schools	35
Pottstown students in private schools	219
Pottstown students being home-schooled	19