

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Pottstown School Board oversight

Last week the Pottstown School Board gave carte blanche to our administrators to furlough employees as they see fit.

Specifically, we authorized the administration “to take any and all necessary steps to furlough and/or reduce hours of exempt and support staff employees and positions due to a lack of work for these employees in their positions as the result of the ongoing COVID-19 Crisis, and the District’s determination to utilize online/virtual learning to begin the school year to maximize the health and safety of the school community.”

The school district employs 525 staff, of whom less than a third are regular classroom teachers. The others include specialists, aides, paraprofessionals, clerks, and maintenance staff.

Superintendent Stephen Rodriguez said he will make every effort to “repurpose” employees to provide support to families, including technical support to families in off-hours and even visiting those who are not engaged (with masks and distancing).

The board has asked administrators to provide in September a list of what all employees will be doing in the fall semester, in addition to the names of those furloughed.

All school board members, of course, know how in-person classrooms function, but virtual learning is new to all of us.

Now that the board is conducting its meetings virtually, using Zoom, we have an idea how a small group of people can interact. But none of us has witnessed a virtual classroom.

Our school board meetings are now broadcast live on Facebook and taped so citizens can watch them at any time. I didn’t like the idea at first, but I find myself reviewing the tapes to recall what happened. I realized I’ve missed a lot of things the first time around. We still keep written minutes, of course, but the tapes are much more detailed and exact.

Likewise, the virtual lessons of all our teachers will also be taped, so students can review lessons as often as necessary on their Chromebooks to absorb what is being taught.

I’m sure they will be useful to the teachers, as well.

A major drawback to taping lessons, however, is that they are unforgiving when things don’t go well. We all have bad days and say things we regret. I’ve had some cringe-worthy moments at school board meetings myself, which are now unfortunately immortalized on tape.

As a school board, we need to ensure taped lessons are used strictly for learning and not as a means to find fault or disparage any teacher.

In the 2014-2015 school year I spent 150 hours visiting every classroom in the district, K-12, and I kept my observations to myself, not sharing

them with teachers, principals, or other administrators.

Board members will have access to the taped virtual lessons. This year we are responsible for 65 million taxpayer dollars, 55 percent of them raised locally, and we better know what’s going on, especially in this brave new world of virtual classrooms.

I’m confident board members will view these tapes with the discretion they deserve.

Let’s hope the virtual learning experience will show us cost-effective new ways to teach.

Although the district is receiving full funding from the state this year, nothing is guaranteed for next year.

State revenues for this fiscal year are predicted to be short \$5 billion, and revenues may be worse next year.

Meanwhile, Pottstown’s property assessments continue to decline. We must become more efficient.

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



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Pottstown’s Tax Base

Year	Total assessed valuation
1998	\$816,841,351
2019	\$764,486,739
2020	\$760,866,089

Source of PSD funding 2020-2021 school year

Source	Percentage	Amount
Local	55%	\$35,511,647
State	42%	\$27,475,373
Federal	3%	\$2,381,663