

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Students first, subjects second

There's a saying in education, "Elementary school teachers teach children. Secondary school teachers teach subjects."

In the classic elementary school with self-contained classrooms, the teacher has the same 20 to 30 students all year long and teaches all subjects — reading, math, science, social studies.

At the high school level, each teacher specializes in one subject and sees a much higher number of students during the year, typically more than a hundred.

Elementary school teachers, therefore, have a much better opportunity to know the whole child, while secondary teachers are more likely to see students as vessels to be filled with a prescribed amount of knowledge in math or English.

Pottstown demographics

In Pottstown, where our student body is overwhelmingly low and moderate income, knowing the whole child is more important than in districts that primarily serve middle class families.

Some of our parents struggled in school themselves.

And some families are dysfunctional and develop a whole host of destructive behaviors that children carry with them into the classroom.

Ruby Payne

No one has done a better job of explaining the culture of poverty than Ruby Payne, a former teacher and principal who has researched and practiced ways public schools can help bring children out of poverty.

Her book, "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," has for years been required reading in many school districts nationwide.

"Generational" vs. "Situational"

Payne makes a clear distinction between "situational" poverty, which describes formerly middle class families who become poor for reasons such as a divorce, or the breadwinner dies or loses a job, and "generational" poverty, which describes families who have been poor for two or more generations.

Children in generational poverty aren't simply lacking the financial resources of the middle class. They live in an entirely different culture that obstructs conventional learning

in school, Payne says.

The problem is not intelligence, Payne writes. Poor children are just as bright as middle class children.

But they come to school with a system of thought processes and behaviors that are significantly different from the middle class.

For example, middle class families value work and achievement. They believe education is crucial to success.

On the other hand, Payne says, people in generational poverty value education in the abstract but don't think it applies to them. They are far more interested in the present than the future, because they believe fate, not

their actions, governs their destiny. Some other attributes of generational poverty:

- At home, the TV is always on and there is no personal space as in a middle class family, where most children have their own room.
- In conversation, the most important information is not what is said, but in non-verbal cues and gestures.
- Emphasis is on current feeling, not long-term ramifications of behavior. Students will work hard only if they like you.

Because of the pandemic, our teachers have spent the last year teaching children virtually, seeing each one in his own home. For the first time, they can look into their students' homes and see a lot of what Payne is talking about.

To succeed in school, students in generational poverty must leave the culture in which they were born, Payne says. This is terribly difficult.

Relationships all-important

Therefore, teachers must do more than teach subject matter. They have to be role models and mentors. They have to show students the rules they need to follow if they want to join the middle class.

Relationship-building is vitally important, and it's time-consuming. Teachers must get to know students personally. If they don't, they'll never succeed at teaching subject matter.

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