

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The oversimplified message

“Fair funding” is among a plethora of causes and sales pitches filling the airwaves and the internet.

Almost everyone — including poor people — has a smart phone in hand, providing a steady stream of information from everyone in the world who’s trying to tell you something or sell you something.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

To get through, a message has to be simple.

“Not unless they repeal the law of nature that gives us only 24 hours in a day will they find a way to stuff more into the mind,” point out advertising experts Al Ries and Jack Trout.

“The mind, as a defense against the volume of today’s communications, screens and rejects much of the information offered to it. In general, the mind accepts only that which matches prior knowledge or experience.

“Once a mind is made up, it’s almost impossible to change it. ‘Don’t confuse me with the facts, my mind’s made up.’ That’s a way of life for most people.”

The best approach in an overcommunicated society, the experts advise, is the oversimplified message.

“You have to jettison the ambiguities, simplify the message and then simplify it some more if you want to make a long-lasting impression.”

“Fair funding” is a good example.

For decades, the public school community has complained it’s underfunded, even though education spending has increased at *triple* the rate of inflation since the 1960s.

Pennsylvania, like all states, provides subsidies to local school districts. But it’s one of the lowest overall subsidies in the nation — just 35 percent of total school spending. Local taxpayers pay the rest.

Pennsylvania has always given more money per pupil to poor school districts than affluent ones. But in 2016, the state revised its funding formula. The new formula gives more money to 137 school districts and less money to 363 districts based on a variety of factors. But the formula hasn’t been fully implemented.

Because Pottstown would get a lot more money under the new formula, — about \$11 million — Pottstown’s administrators and school board have been campaigning mightily for its full implementation.

In doing so, they’ve oversimplified the message.

Poor districts are underfunded. If we had more money to spend, we could do much more to boost student outcomes.

But extra millions aren’t going to solve our educational problems. Beyond a certain base amount, there’s no evidence that higher spending boosts student achievement.

At \$40,000 per pupil, the Aliquippa School District in western Pennsylvania is the highest spending school district in the state. It’s also one of the poorest. Its results are even worse than poverty-stricken Reading, one of the lowest spending school districts in the state at \$15,000 per pupil.

“Fair funding” would be great. But there’s no panacea, and rethinking educational practices would be more effective than a spending spree.

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

