

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Helping the poor — and Pottstown

By far the largest impact on the health of Pottstown and its quality of life in the last century has been the suburban migration that started in the 1950s.

Middle class people moved out of Pottstown and other older towns like Norristown, Reading and Allentown, leaving behind the poor who couldn't afford to follow. Neighborhoods deteriorated.

Middle class migrants in the suburbs rationalized that public schools would enable poor children to rise above poverty as adults.

But decades of research shows that schools have only a modest effect on the academic performance of their students. As the eminent sociologist, James Coleman, reported, "the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront life at the end of school."

This is easily seen by comparing Pennsylvania school districts. The higher the incidence of student poverty, the lower the rate of academic achievement.

The best, and perhaps only, way for most poor children to succeed is to grow up in middle class neighborhoods.

A recent study by two Harvard economists emphasized the enormous impact neighborhoods have on the trajectory of poor children.

Twenty years ago, the federal government launched an experiment involving Section 8 vouchers called "Move to Opportunity." Usu-

ally, people with rental subsidy vouchers stayed in low income neighborhoods, but this program provided enough money for voucher recipients to move to middle class neighborhoods. The Harvard study, which involved 13,000 children, found that young children (age 13 or lower) whose families moved to better neighborhoods earned about 30 percent more money when they reached adulthood, were more likely to marry, and more likely to attend college.

Of course, it would be economically and politi-

cally impossible to subsidize the movement of large numbers of poor families to middle class suburbs.

But it's not impossible to help the poor people already in Pottstown by encouraging more middle class families to move in. The more our neighborhoods improve, the better our poor children will do.

And one readily available source of potential middle class residents is our borough and school district employees, who should be given incentives to live here.

In a world with huge fiscal and environmental problems, Pottstown's strength is sustainability.

Thanks to its mixture of houses, offices and stores, which can be reached by walking, bicycling, and short car and bus trips, Pottstown is more aligned with the needs of the 21st century than the car-dependent suburbs of the last one.

Millennials in particular want the walking and biking lifestyle. To attract them, we must promote ourselves as a heart-healthy town.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



Poor children who grow up in middle class neighborhoods are far more likely to succeed than children who grow up in poor neighborhoods.