

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Front line leaders remain

For the first time in more than two generations, the Pottstown School Board is seeking a superintendent from outside the district.

For decades, whenever an opening occurred, the school board simply promoted the existing assistant superintendent to the top job.

But now the board has to do some independent thinking. And none of us has expertise in law, management, or finance. But we do have the legal obligation to set educational goals and academic standards for the district.

Foremost in my mind is our precarious financial position. Our tax base continues to decline. We can't keep doing things in the same way — it's just not sustainable.

My thinking is powerfully influenced by one of the top management books of all time, *In Search of Excellence*, written in 1982.



The authors described the values and practices of America's best-run companies. (One of those companies is Dana Corp., whose Pottstown plant has been a mainstay of our town for 95 years.)

The authors spent two years interviewing executives of America's most highly regarded companies.

"We heard talk of organizational cultures, the family feeling, small is beautiful, simplicity rather than complexity," the authors reported. "In short, we found the obvious, that the individual human being still counts."

When bringing in a new CEO, the authors said, "... an inflexible organization chart, which assumes anyone in a given position will perform exactly as his predecessor did, is ridiculous. He won't. Therefore the organization ought to shift and adjust and adapt to the fact there's a new person in the spot."

In recent years, the Pottstown School Board has benefitted from a tireless superintendent

with a long history and deep knowledge of the district. Consequently, he's been running everything, which makes it easy for the school directors but limits the autonomy and discretion of our building principals.

With a newcomer, that can't — and shouldn't be — the case.

And here we can take a lesson from Rene McPherson, who was president of Dana in the 1970s. McPherson threw out 22½ inches of policy manuals and replaced them with a one-page statement of philosophy focusing on the "productive people."

He invented the "store manager" concept, which meant giving his factory managers lots of authority.

"They had unusual control over hiring and firing; they had their own financial control systems; they did their own purchasing — all tasks that are normally centralized. McPherson's view was that these are the people on the front line; they're likely, over the long haul, to make better decisions than any central staff."

In school district-speak, this is often called "site-based management." It recognizes that building principals are our No. 1 educational leaders. They're the ones dealing directly with our teachers, students, and parents.

Our superintendent is retiring, but he's leaving a legacy of fine educational leaders, all of whom he hired:

- Ryan Oxenford, principal, Barth Elementary School.
- Kevin Downes, principal, Franklin Elementary School.

- Calista Boyer, principal, Lincoln Elementary School.

- Matt Moyer, principal, Rupert Elementary School.

- Matt Boyer, principal, Pottstown Middle School (grades 5-6).

- David Todd, principal, Pottstown Middle School (grades 7-8).

- Danielle McCoy, principal, Pottstown High School.

As a new superintendent learns about Pottstown, now is the time for our principals and teachers to shine.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

