

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Lessons from a one-room school

My favorite 20th century educator is Albert Shanker, a New York City teacher who became president of the American Federation of Teachers, serving from 1974 to 1997.

(The Federation of Pottstown Teachers is an affiliate.) Although Shanker was considered a radical in his early years, he became widely respected for promoting high standards and creative thinking.

He wrote a weekly column as an advertisement published in the Sunday *New York Times* entitled *Where We Stand*. (These columns are the inspiration for my "advertorials" published bi-weekly in *The Mercury*.)

Shanker's thoughts are so relevant to Pottstown I plan to publish them from time to time, starting today.

Recently, I've written about the importance of developing personal relationships in teaching, which works well with self-contained classrooms where the teacher covers a variety of subjects, not just one.

Here's some excerpts from Shanker's column (12-17-1989), *Lessons from the One-Room School*:

"Teachers in one-room schoolhouses almost never lectured. These teachers knew there wasn't much they could say simultaneously to a roomful of kids of different ages and stages of learning.

"So teacher moved from one group of two or three students to another. Because they couldn't spend much time with any group, they usually assigned some work to each, making sure that the group had a pretty good idea of how to proceed.

"Periodically, the teacher would return to each group to make sure the work was being done correctly and to offer help where it was needed. And teachers frequently asked students who'd mastered a particular task to help those who were still struggling to learn it.

"These teachers had to work this way because of the vast differences among children.

"Today, this practice is rare, but the issue of individual differences persists. For example, it's not hard to find a seventh- or eighth-grade class in which one or two students are still at the third-grade level in reading or math, a few others are at fourth-grade level, and many are at the seventh- or eighth-grade level and some are able to do ninth- and tenth-grade work.

"But the fact that our heterogeneous seventh- and eighth-graders are all about the same age leads us to organize the class so they are all expected to do the same work in the same way and within about the same time.

"No wonder so many of them are bored or feel lost — and no wonder so many of their teachers are frustrated.

"Most teachers probably try to strike a balance by pitching their lessons to the "average" students, but this means that many students won't be able to understand what's going on while many more will be bored and will come to believe that it is not necessary to do much work in school because work is so easy. ...

"Teachers in one-room schools managed to teach kids with an eight-year range, and we should be able to manage classrooms with a similar range of differences.

"Nor should we view this way of doing things as inferior to our current system. What one-room school teachers did out of necessity — avoid teacher talk and get kids to do work on their own or in small groups — is actually a superior way of getting them to learn."

But, Shanker said, teachers are so burdened with work it would be difficult to prepare individual lessons for each student, or even small groups.

But as far back as 1989, Shanker foresaw an increased role for technology in individualizing instruction.

(More later)

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



Commentary by
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ALBERT SHANKER (1928-1997) was president of the American Federation of Teachers.