

Pottstown Planning Commission

Pottstown Elementary School and Pre-school Education Options

An independent report by David Anstrand
Educational Facilities Planner

*Assisted by Thomas Hylton
Pottstown Planning Commission*

This report has not been endorsed
by the Pottstown School District



Pottstown explores options for elementary school upgrades

By David Anstrand
Educational Facilities Planner

Does the Pottstown School District need a downtown elementary school? Should it build a center for pre-school education instead? Can it make do with the schools it already has?

These are among the options I've been asked to explore as the Pottstown School Board considers the future of its elementary school facilities. In recent years, the school district has completed nearly \$40 million in additions and renovations to its high school and middle school. Now the district is turning its attention to its elementary schools.

Disclaimer

The options described in this report are general concepts only. If any of the options are considered, there naturally will be other factors and issues that need to be addressed and examined prior to formal implementation. It should be noted that any references to cost in any option contained in this report are estimates only and not based upon firm bids from contractors. Finally, it should be made clear that the Pottstown School District has not authorized the publication of this report. Therefore, the options as described in this report have not been endorsed by the District.

High busing costs

Although the Pottstown School District covers less than five square miles and has five neighborhood elementary schools, it still spends \$1.1 million annually busing pupils. This is not only expensive, it creates traffic and air pollution. It eliminates a daily source of student exercise. It "disconnects" school locations from the neighborhoods they serve. One of my objectives, therefore, is to see if busing can be reduced.

Another objective is to explore the costs and benefits of various school facility options for housing Pottstown's elementary school students in the future. In 1989, Pottstown became a statewide leader in pre-school education by creating a half-day kindergarten for 4-year-olds (4-K). This year, the district has extended its kindergarten for 5-year-olds (5-K) from a half day to a full day.

Rising percentage of low income students

The percentage of students from low income families in Pottstown has risen from about 25 percent in the 1970s to more than 50 percent today. The school district's minority population has likewise doubled since the 1970s, from 21 percent to 46 percent.

Pottstown is far less segregated than it used to be. Low income and minority students can increasingly be found in nearly all neighborhoods of Pottstown.

Rising number of special ed students

In 1991, Pottstown had seven special education teachers. Today, it employs 42, as the percentage of special education students has risen to 11 percent of all students. This places an even heavier burden on district taxpayers. The school district spends about \$8,200 for each regular education student, but about \$13,000 to \$14,000 for each special education student. Based on square footage per student, special education students require more space than students in the regu-

lar education program.

Charter schools an added expense

The Pottstown School District must also pay the costs of educating young people living in Pottstown who attend charter schools - \$7,800 per pupil. This year, Pottstown taxpayers are spending \$700,000 to educate students at the Renaissance Academy in Phoenixville and several "cyber" charter schools.

High local tax effort

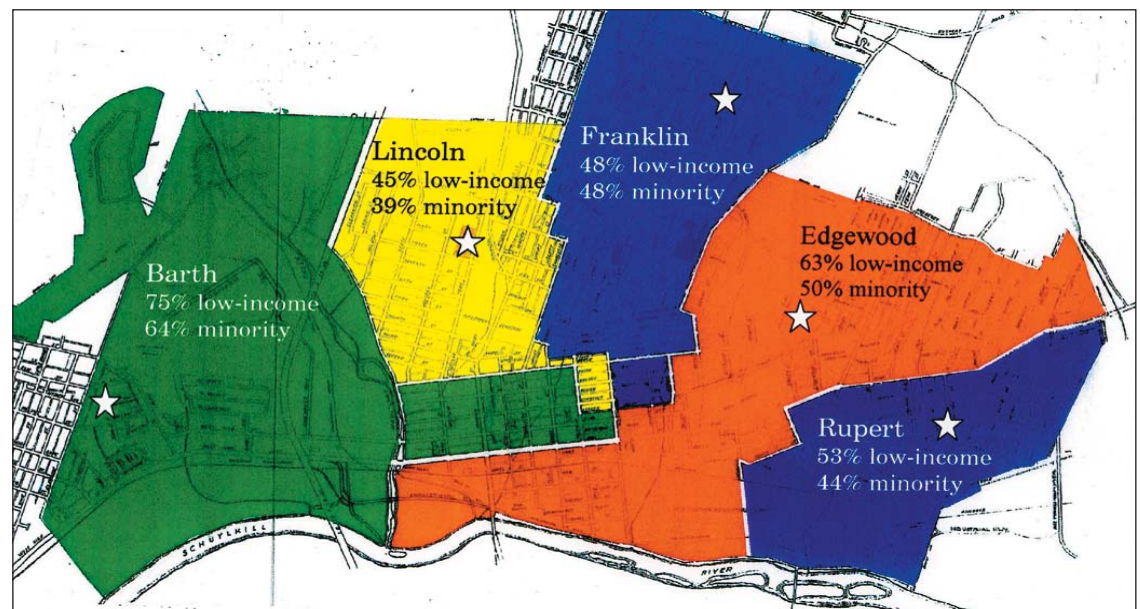
Pottstown can be proud of its commitment to education, but the ability of the local community to pay for new or renovated facilities is an important consideration. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pottstown ranks eighth of 501 school districts in the amount of taxes it raises in proportion to

the district's tax base. Outside help for renovations or new construction will be needed.

The district is currently paying down \$42 million in capital project debt. The district has the legal authority to borrow another \$38 million during the next four years, but it is not committed to doing so.

Can schools help revitalization?

Pottstown has made great strides in revitalizing its downtown in recent years, with a new borough hall and park, a new West Campus of the Montgomery County Community College, and the restoration of the former First Union Bank building at High and Hanover streets. I will examine the possibility that a new school facility, properly designed and located, could help with these revitalization efforts.



The attendance boundaries for Pottstown's elementary schools have remained unchanged since 1980. Low income and minority children are evenly distributed among the schools.

Percentage of students from low-income families		
1977-1978	1992-1993	2004-2005
27%	35%	54%
Percentage of minority students		
1974-1975	1994-1995	2004-2005
21%	31%	46%
Annual cost of busing Pottstown students to and from school		
7 full-sized contracted buses	410 regular education students bused within the district 31 private school students	\$278,317
9 school district vans and drivers	13 regular education students within the district 35 special education students within the district 17 special education students outside the district 9 private school students outside the district	\$549,843
13 contracted vans	10 regular education students outside the district 29 special education students outside the district 59 private school students outside the district	\$265,296
Other costs		\$62,850
TOTAL COSTS		\$1,156,000
Less state reimbursement		(\$460,000)
DIRECT COST TO POTTSTOWN TAXPAYERS		\$696,000

Can Pottstown attract middle class families?

Pottstown needs more middle class families. Middle class families have the financial ability to improve Pottstown's housing stock and increase the borough's tax base.

The number of middle class families in Pottstown has been declining in recent decades, but there are reasons to believe this trend can be reversed.

A new movement called "Smart Growth" advocates new development that places stores, homes and offices in close proximity, to take up less space and allow people to walk for some of their activities. Smart Growth addresses growing concerns about the loss of open space and the negative environmental impact of sprawling development.

Currently, more than 650 "neo-traditional" developments are being constructed across the country. These communities imitate many of the qualities Pottstown already enjoys:

- *A traditional main street that provides a pleasant atmosphere for walking as well as driving.
- *Neighborhoods with a sense of place created by landmarks such as schools and churches.
- *An interconnected network of streets and sidewalks that allow people to walk for some of their activities.

Many middle class families, weary of long commutes and isolated housing lots, are looking with interest at established towns like Pottstown that have a sense of history and identity.

Pottstown's neighborhood schools are a critical draw to these families. Parents like the idea of having a school within walking distance of their homes.



New town features neighborhood school

The nation's most famous "neo-traditional" community is Celebration, Florida, founded by the Disney Development Co. in 1996 near Orlando.

The \$2.5 billion community is designed to look and feel like a pre-World War II town like Pottstown. It has a small downtown surrounded by a mix of apartment buildings, townhouses, and single family homes of all sizes. Tree-lined streets and sidewalks encourage people to walk rather drive for many of their activities. The town currently has 8,000 residents but will eventually house 12,000 people.



The Celebration School, a walkable K-8 public school in Celebration, Florida.

The centerpiece of the town is a public elementary school within walking distance of all the homes that contains grades kindergarten through 8. Walkable public schools are a major attraction in other neo-traditional communities, such as the Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and Southern Village in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

New school planned in downtown Lititz



Lancaster County's Warwick School District is building a new elementary school in downtown Lititz, a historic borough of 9,000 residents.

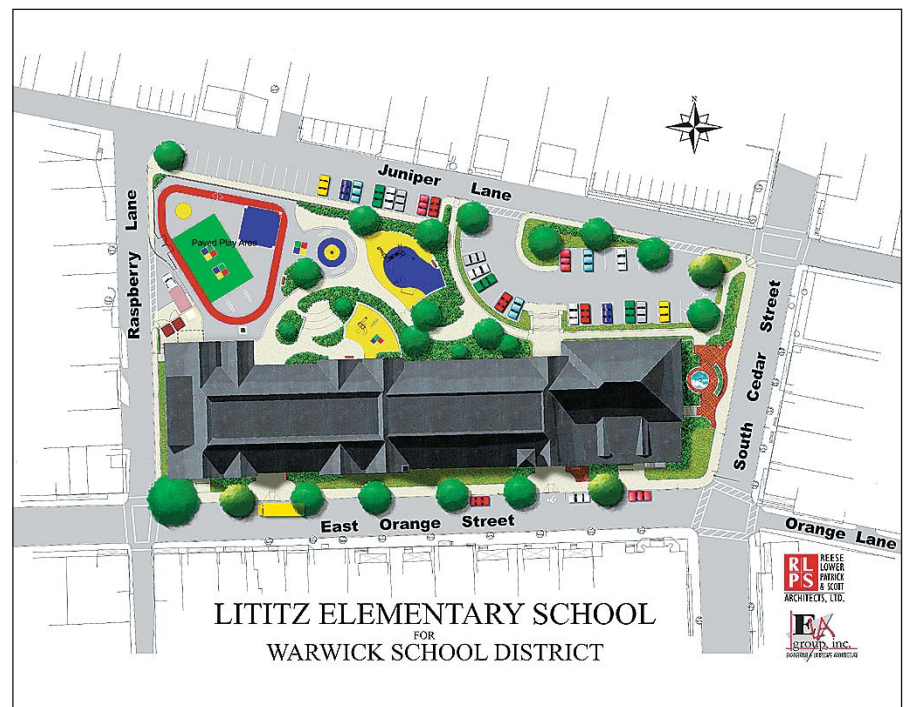
The district decided to replace the 1916 Lititz Elementary School, but agreed to rebuild a new school on the same 2.5-acre site. About 70 percent of the school's pupils are walkers.

"The school district held public meetings and genuinely listened," says Karen Weibel, chairman of the Lititz Planning Commission. "People came out and said how important the school was to them. An older neighbor up the block said she looks forward to the beginning of the school year, because she loves to hear the kids talking and playing on the way to school. A young mother

talked about the friendships she gained with neighbors she met walking her children to school. The streets are alive with people in the morning and when school lets out in the afternoon."

Warwick superintendent Stephen Iovino said having a school in the heart of Lititz was vital to keeping a healthy community. "Our driving force was the importance of neighborhood schools," he says. "Our teachers talked about how important the town was as a place for learning. They could walk their kids to the police station, the fire house, and other places. And the town needs the school to survive. It gives people a reason to stay in Lititz."

- from *Central Pennsylvania Magazine*, November 2004



Left: An artist's model of the new Lititz Elementary School. Above: A plot plan of the new school on 2.5 acres in the heart of Lititz.

Pottstown closes its downtown neighborhood elementary schools

In the 1960s, when Pottstown's population reached its peak, the Pottstown School District enrolled more than 5,000 students.

Each neighborhood had its own elementary school. Students in downtown Pottstown south of High Street walked to the St. Clair Elementary School at South Street and South Charlotte Street.

Students north of High Street between Manatawny Street and Charlotte Street walked to the Washington Elementary School at Walnut and Penn Streets.

The district also had an Intermediate School, formerly the high school, at Chestnut and Penn Streets.

In 1969, when Edgewood Elementary School was built, the district closed the St. Clair School and sold it to Mrs. Smith's Pie Co., which demolished the school for a parking lot.

That same year, the Washington School was closed. The building became part of the adjacent school district administration building. Walkers to that school were instead bused to the West End Elementary School (renamed Barth School in 1983).

For the first time, the downtown lacked its own elementary school.

As enrollments continued to decline in the 1970s, the school district closed the Intermediate School. It was later sold to a nearby church and demolished for a parking lot.

In 1980, in order to promote a racial balance among its elementary schools, the Jefferson Elementary School at Beech and Warren streets was closed and turned into a pre-school education center. Pupils attending the Jefferson Elementary School were divided among the five remaining elementary schools.

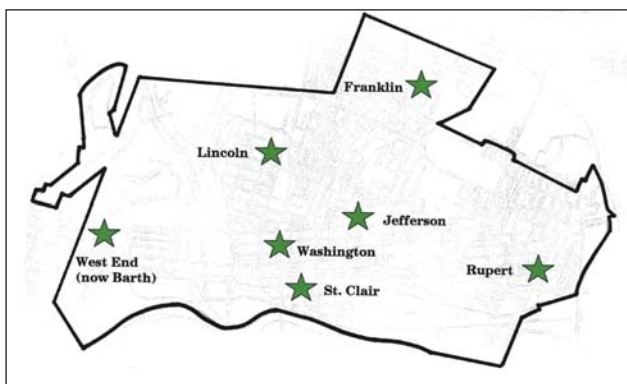
Last year, the former Jefferson School was converted into senior apartments by the Pennrose Property Co.



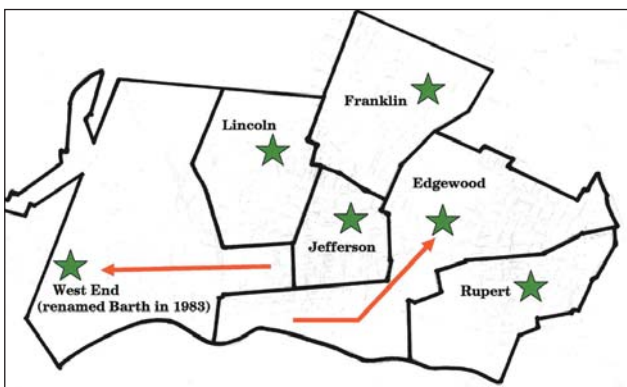
The Washington Elementary School, built as a wing to the school district administration building in 1955, was closed in 1969 and is now administrative offices.



The St. Clair Elementary School was closed in 1969. The building was sold to Mrs. Smith's Pie Co., which demolished it for a parking lot.



Prior to 1970, all Pottstown neighborhoods had their own elementary school.



When the Washington Elementary School was closed in 1969, its students were bused to the West End (now Barth) Elementary School. The St. Clair School was closed that same year and its students were bused to the Edgewood Elementary School.



The Jefferson Elementary School was closed in 1980 and its students reassigned to Pottstown's other five elementary schools to achieve racial balance among all the schools.

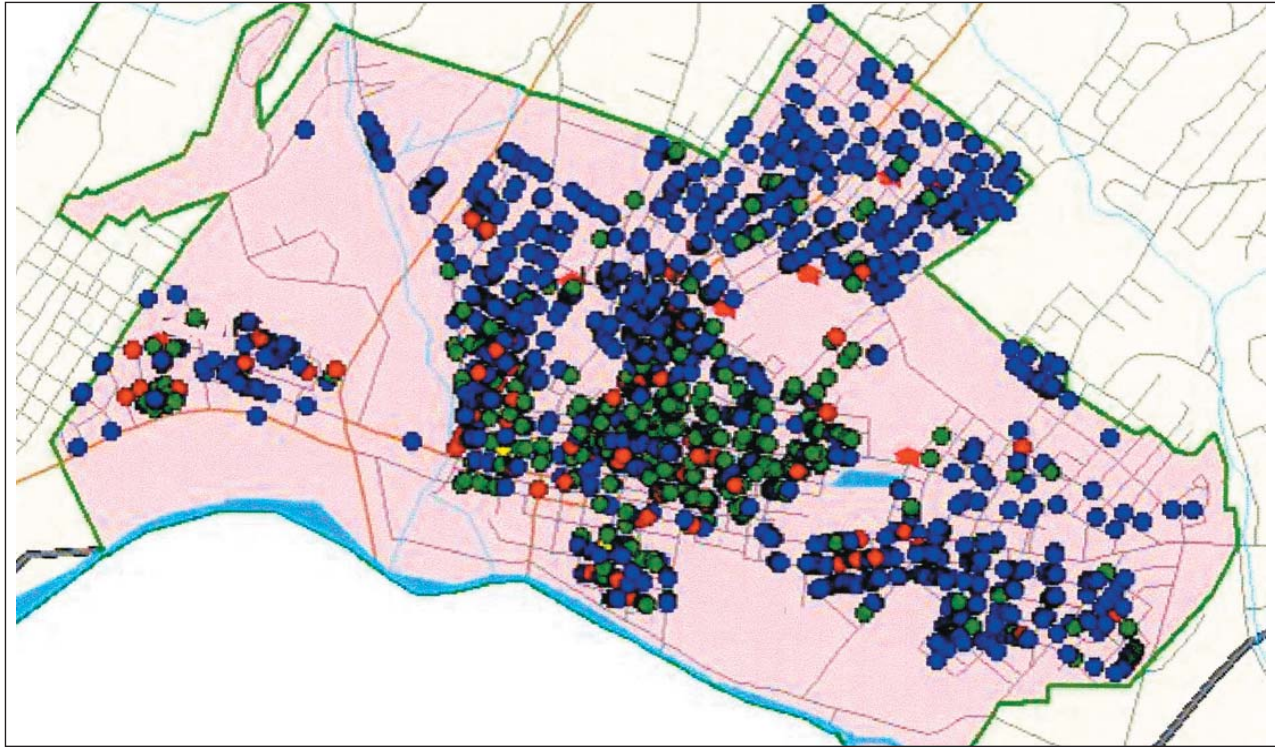
Pottstown lacks a school where most children live

Since Pottstown desegregated its elementary schools in 1980 by closing the Jefferson School, the borough has become far more racially integrated.

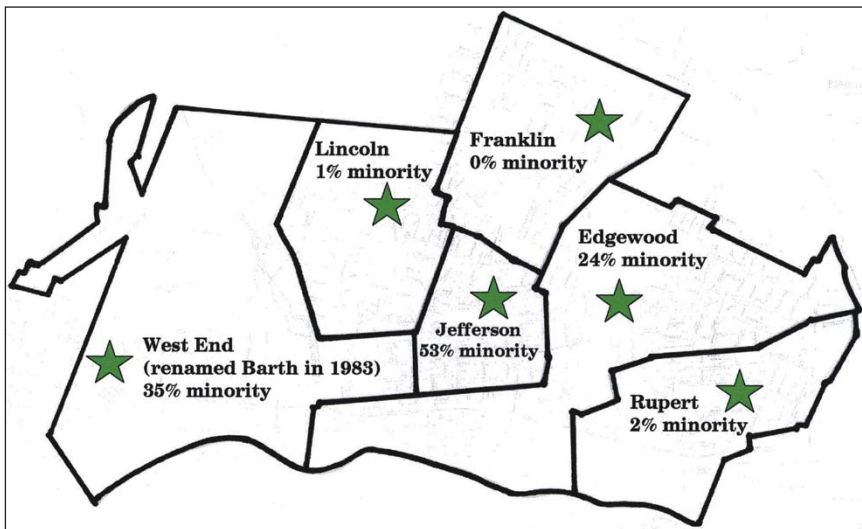
With each passing year, blacks, Latinos, and other minority families are becoming more evenly dispersed throughout Pottstown's neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, because it closed its downtown schools 30 years ago, Pottstown does not have an elementary school where the highest concentration of students is located. Those students are bused to other schools.

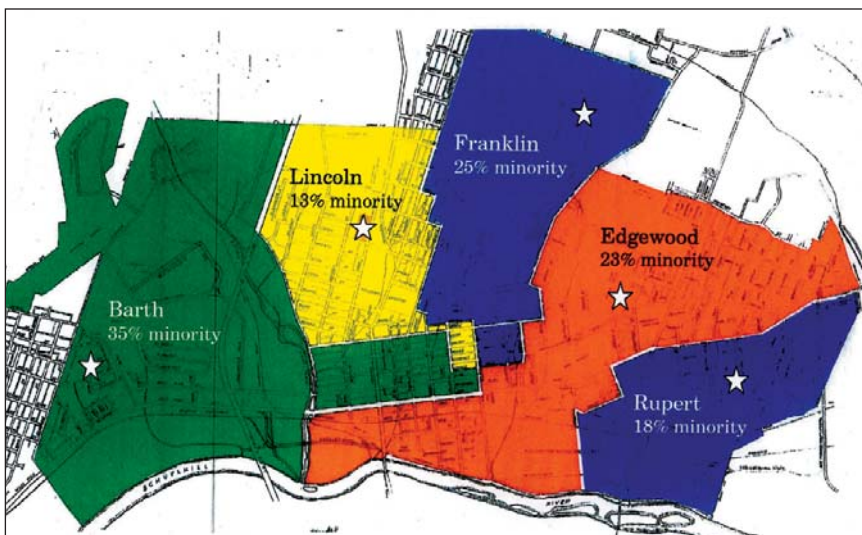
The lack of a neighborhood school may reduce the quality of their learning experience.



The location of all Pottstown elementary education students enrolled in the regular education program. The highest concentration of students of all races is in downtown Pottstown.

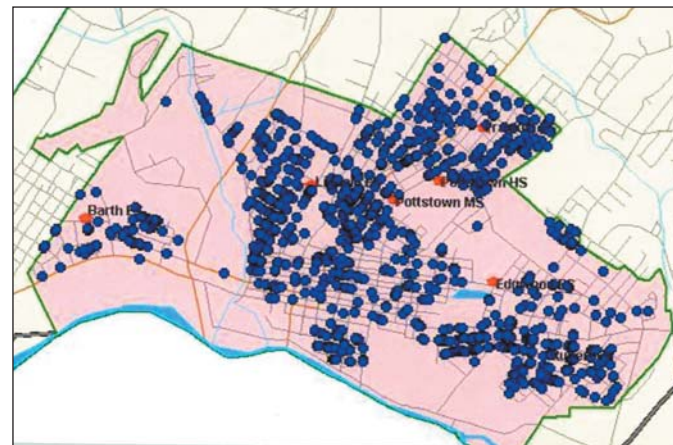
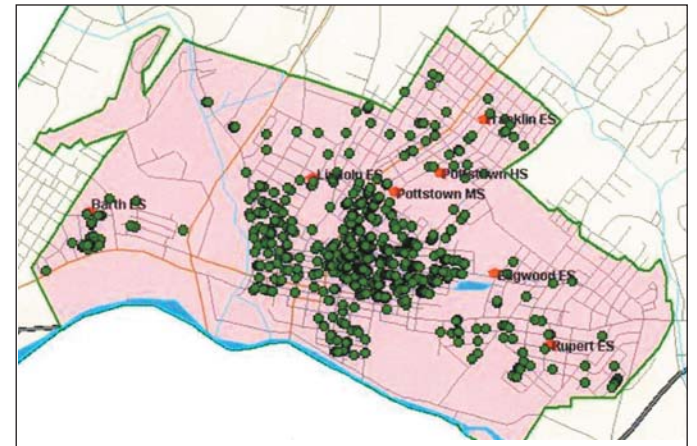


During the 1970s, enrollment in Pottstown schools was declining and its elementary schools were racially imbalanced. The district had more classrooms than it needed.



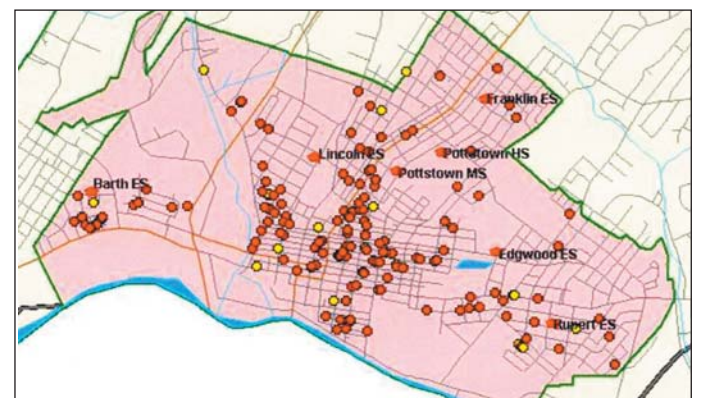
By closing the Jefferson Elementary School in 1980, the school district reduced its excess capacity and achieved racial balance among its elementary schools.

The location of black elementary school students living in Pottstown



The location of white elementary school students living in Pottstown

The location of Latino, Asian, and native American elementary school students living in Pottstown



Pottstown can reduce busing - with or without a downtown elementary school

Although the Pottstown School District covers less than 5 square miles, it spends more than \$1.1 million annually busing students to school.

Much of this expense is for special education. But a sizable amount - nearly \$400,000 - is for busing regular education elementary school students.

Pottstown buses private school students

Under state law, any busing services provided to Pottstown public school students must also be provided to private school students.

Because it buses regular education elementary school students, Pottstown must spend more than \$100,000 annually busing private elementary school students also. This expense could be eliminated if all Pottstown elementary school students could walk to school.

State busing standards

Under state law, public school districts may bus secondary school students who live more than two miles from school and elementary school students who live more than a mile and a half from school.

This is why Pottstown does not bus any regular education students in grades 6 through 12 - they all live within two miles of Pottstown Middle School and Pottstown High School.

Likewise, all elementary school students live within a mile and a half of at least one of Pottstown's five elementary schools. However, Pottstown buses some students because they must cross one of two hazardous routes to get to school. Students who live in downtown Pottstown and attend Barth School are bused because they must cross Route 100 - a hazardous route.

High Street no longer hazardous

Students in downtown Pottstown bused to Edgewood and Rupert schools must cross High Street. While High Street might have been a hazardous route in years past, the street has recently been reconfigured to eliminate two traffic lanes. High Street now has just one traffic lane in each direction, plus bike lanes. With crossing guards, it should be no more hazardous for students to cross High Street than it is to cross Hanover or Charlotte streets. It is entirely possible for the school district to petition PennDOT to remove the "hazardous" designation for High Street.

PennDOT is especially likely to do so because the agency is officially encouraging students to walk to school. In fact, PennDOT has launched a "safe routes to school" program which offers municipalities grant money to build sidewalks and walking paths to schools.

Racially balanced schools can be maintained

Twice as many students are bused to Barth Elementary School as walk to the school. Yet one of the original reasons for busing students to Barth - to retain racial balance - no longer exists. The racial bal-

ance of walkers to Barth is the same as the students being bused. Therefore, if all the students now bused to Barth walked to either Lincoln School or a new downtown school, Barth would retain the same racial mix it has today. But it would be a much smaller school. Other uses would need to be found for the extra classroom space at the school.

By redistricting, it should be possible for the other Pottstown elementary schools to retain their racial balance even if all the students walked to school.

All pupils within a mile and half of school

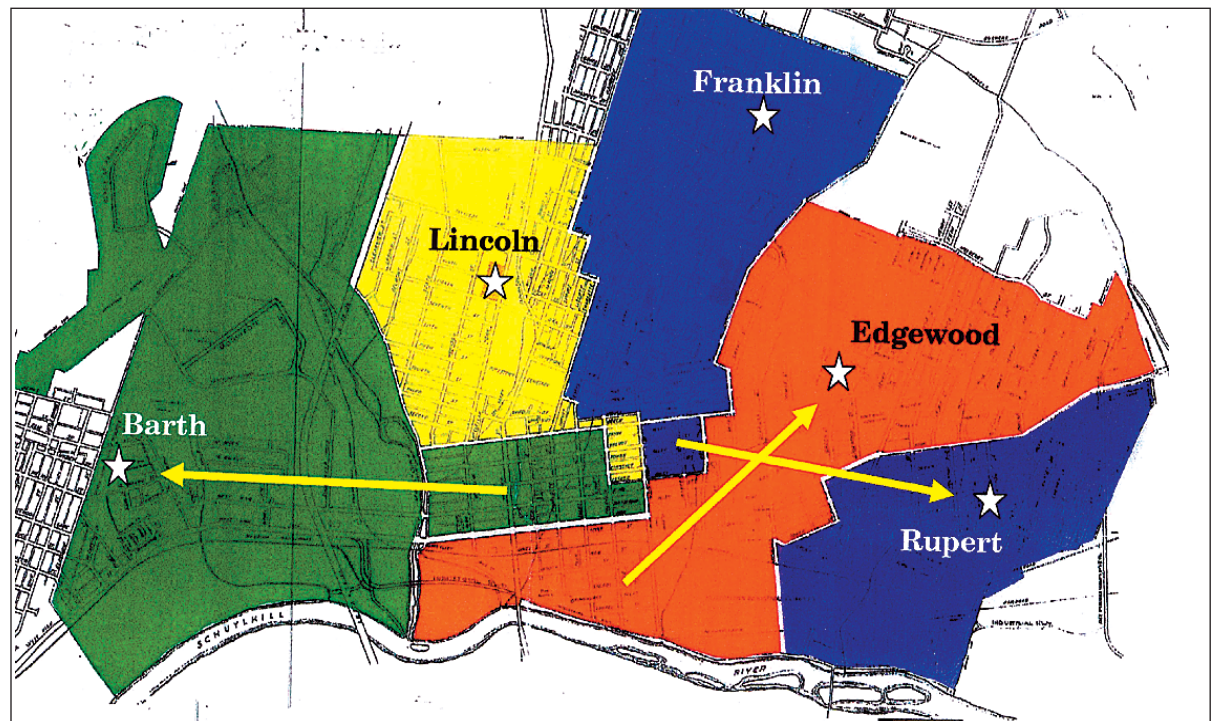
All the pupils who are currently bused to Rupert and Edgewood schools live within a mile and a half of their schools. If these students were allowed to walk across High Street (at designated intersections with crossing guards), Pottstown could eliminate all busing of regular education students for an annual savings of \$382,000, including \$238,000 paid directly by Pottstown taxpayers.

Students need exercise to prevent obesity

Walking to school should not be seen as a hardship. It should be seen as an opportunity to enrich children's lives and improve their health. Obesity is a serious and growing problem in the United States. It increases the risk of heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, and other chronic illnesses.

According to the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation, Pottstown children are twice as likely to be overweight than children in the surrounding area. The surgeon general recommends children should have an hour of moderate to rigorous exercise every day. Children could get all the exercise they need by walking to school.

Pottstown currently employs 16 adult crossing guards at an annual cost of \$83,000. Pottstown could double the number of crossing guards and still save money if it eliminated the busing of regular education students.



Busing costly in Pottstown

Pottstown currently buses about 500 public and private elementary school students at a cost of more than \$382,000.

Most of these pupils are bused to the Barth, Edgewood, and Rupert elementary schools from downtown Pottstown.

7 full-sized contracted buses	410 regular education students bused within the district 31 private school students	\$278,317
6 contracted vans	59 private school students	\$103,836
TOTAL COSTS		\$382,207
Less state reimbursement		-\$143,780
TOTAL SAVINGS FOR POTTSTOWN TAXPAYERS		\$238,427

PennDOT promotes walking to school

Last year, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation announced a program called Home Town Streets and Safe Routes to School.

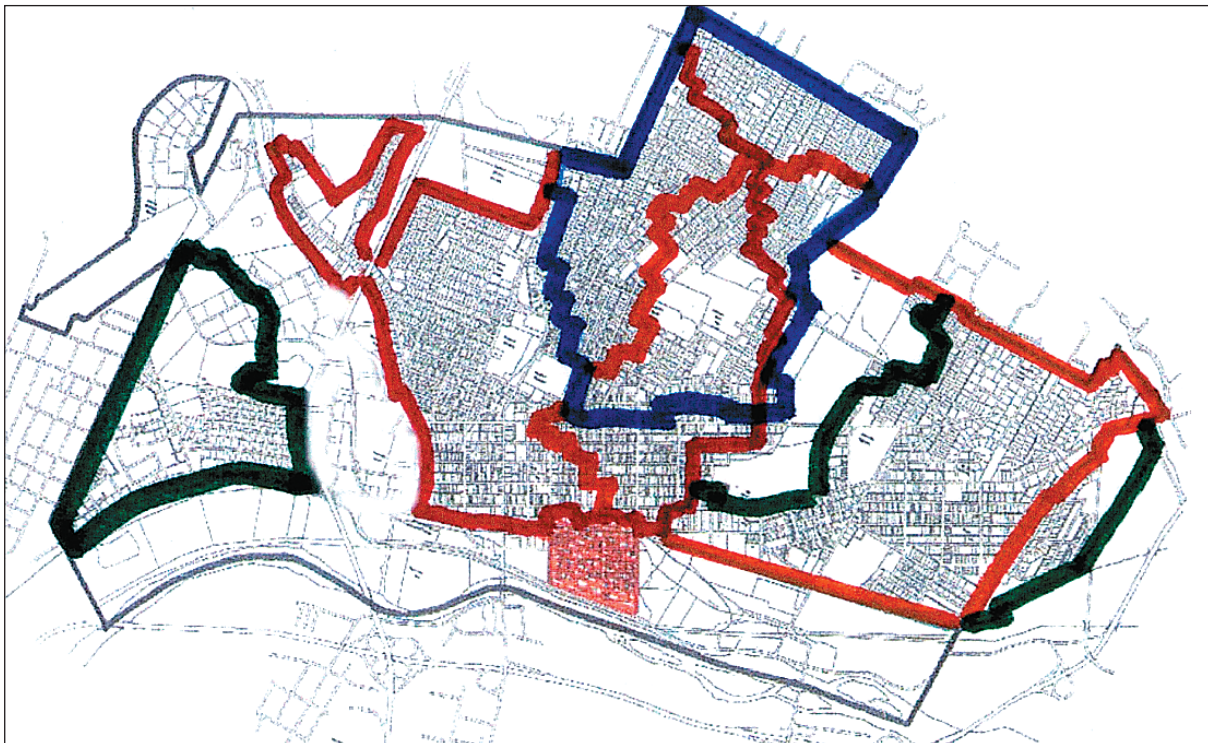
Pennsylvania spends more than \$775 million annually busing students about 381 million miles to and from school.

Recognizing the high economic and environmental costs of all this busing, and recognizing that students need more exercise, PennDOT is offering grants to local municipalities to provide safe routes to school.

“One of the attractions of living in an established community is the proximity of schools and homes,” says PennDOT Secretary Allen Biehler. “We’re happy to have a program that will help make it safer for kids to walk to school.”

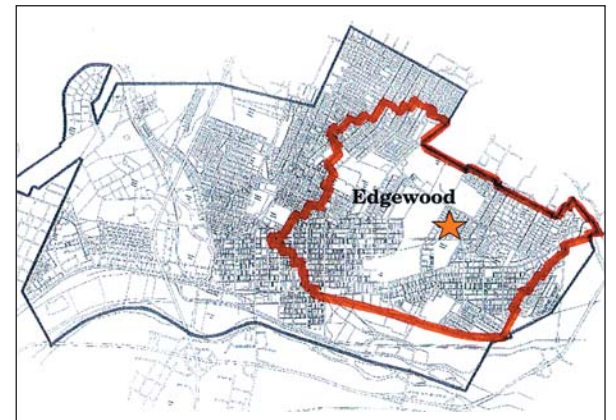


PennDOT Secretary Allen Biehler walks to school with elementary school students in the Camp Hill School District, just outside Harrisburg.

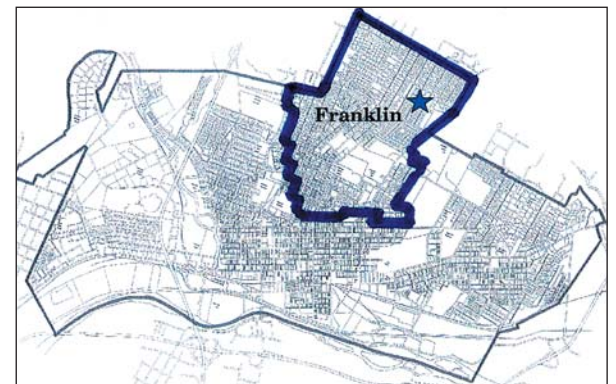


Nearly all Pottstown elementary school students live within a mile - a maximum 20 minute walk - of one of Pottstown's five elementary schools. Only students living on the south side of High Street between Hanover and Washington streets (red shaded area) are farther than a mile from school.

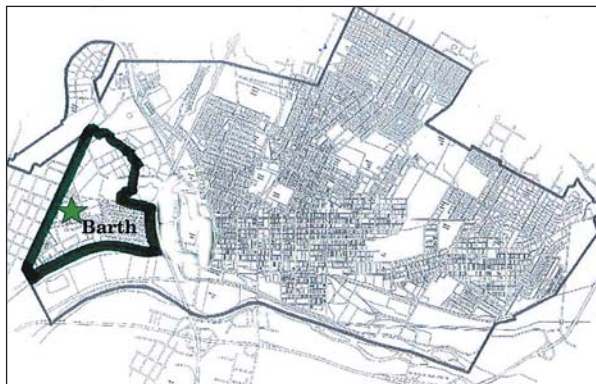
Under Pennsylvania's school code, school districts need to provide busing for students who live more than a mile and a half from school. With crossing guards at High Street, even elementary school students on the south side of High Street are within walking distance of one of Pottstown's five elementary schools.



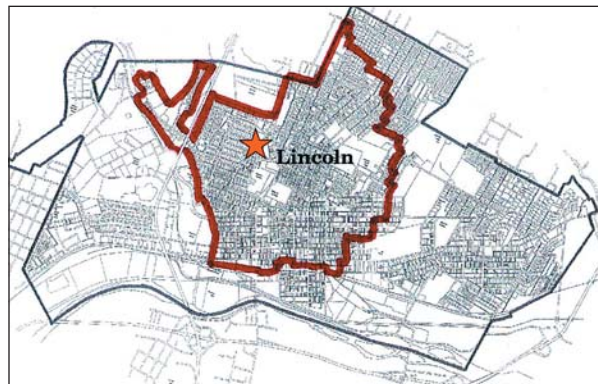
One mile walking distance from Edgewood Elementary School



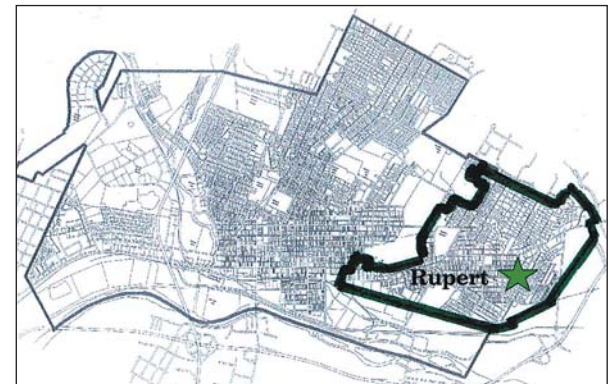
One mile walking distance from Franklin Elementary School



One mile walking distance from Barth Elementary School



One mile walking distance from Lincoln Elementary School



One mile walking distance from Rupert Elementary School

A new school downtown, or just renovate what we have - five options

In 2001, the Pottstown School District commissioned Gilbert Architects to do an evaluation of its elementary schools. In May of that year, Gilbert presented the school board with various options for renovations, additions, and the possible closing of various elementary schools. The proposed projects ranged in cost from \$39 million to \$44 million.

Two years later, the district hired Crabtree, Rohrbaugh & Associates, another architectural firm, to review the Gilbert report and make revised recommendations. Crabtree, Rohrbaugh suggested another series of options ranging in cost from \$32 million to \$36.5 million.

The purpose of my study is to review five other options that have been suggested since the Crabtree, Rohrbaugh study. However, I am using the cost estimates for renovations and new construction used by Crabtree, Rohrbaugh for all options in order to assure a fair comparison of costs. It is important to note the construction costs have risen substantially since the 2003 Crabtree, Rohrbaugh report.

Do the elementary schools need more space?

Crabtree, Rohrbaugh based all its options on the assumption that Pottstown elementary schools should have a combined student capacity of 2,250. This was the result of discussions with district administration as to their needs for a modern instructional program.

However, the district elementary school enrollment last year was 1,710 students, including special education and 4-year-old kindergarten students. The district's enrollment has been declining since 1996 and is projected by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to decline for the next 10 years. During the next five years it is projected to decline by 10 percent.

Within five years, therefore, the district may have excess capacity even without a new school or expanding any of the existing elementary schools.

The school board should carefully consider how much additional space is needed. Option 1, therefore, is renovating the existing schools with only very small additions for a student capacity of 1,675 students.

Pottstown K-5 elementary school enrollment projections

2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
1,614	1,586	1,539	1,459	1,414

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education

Major options considered in prior elementary school studies

Gilbert Architects, May 2001

Crabtree and Rohrbaugh, May 2003

Major option proposed	Cost	Student capacity
Renovate and expand existing five elementary schools	\$32.6 million	2,250
Close Rupert and Barth, build a new school, convert Rupert into an administration building	\$36.5 million	2,250
Close Rupert and add on to remaining four schools	\$28.6 million	2,250
Close Barth and Rupert and build a new school	\$33 million	2,250
Close Rupert, combine Rupert population with Edgewood	\$30 million	2,250

Major options considered in this study

Option	Description	Student capacity	Cost	Total Student capacity	Total cost
1	Renovate existing five schools with minimal additions	1,675	\$12 million	1,675	\$12 million
2	Renovate existing buildings with an early childhood center at each one	2,250	\$20 million	2,250	\$20 million
3	Renovate existing five schools to provide more space per student Build a new early childhood learning center on Washington Street	1,750 500	\$15.6 million \$9.2 million	2,250	\$24.8 million
4	Renovate existing five schools to provide more space per student Build a new downtown school	1,750 500	\$15.6 million \$9.2 million	2,250	\$24.8 million
5	Renovate existing buildings to provide more space per student Lease space from churches to create a downtown elementary school	1,750 250-500	\$15.6 million \$520,000 - 1,000,000	2,000 to 2,250	\$16 to \$17million

Option 1 - Renovate existing schools with very limited additions

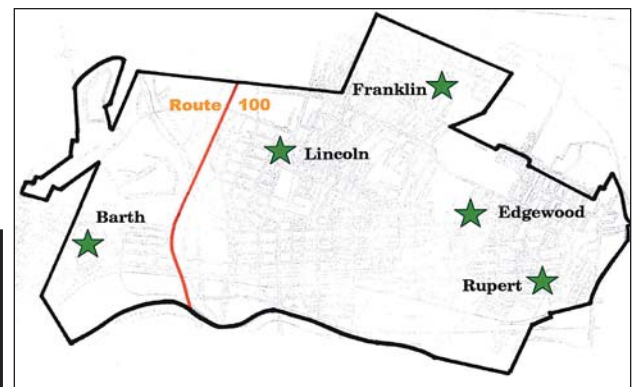
Estimated Cost: \$12 million

ADVANTAGES:

- By far the least expensive option - about half the cost of other options.
- Avoids creating excess classroom capacity the district may not need in the future.
- Busing students could be reduced or eliminated through redistricting the existing schools if the district is willing to allow some students to walk slightly more than a mile to school, which is permitted by state law. This could save Commonwealth and Pottstown taxpayers up to \$382,000 annually, minus the cost of extra crossing guards on High Street and elsewhere.

DISADVANTAGES:

- Does not create as much space as school district administration feels it needs.
- Would not create a downtown elementary school. A walkable neighborhood school could help make the downtown area more attractive to families.



Option 1 envisions minimal additions to Pottstown's existing five elementary schools.



The Marshall School in Harrisburg, a neighborhood elementary school that houses learners from age 3 through eighth grade.

Harrisburg places early learning classes in its elementary schools

Two years ago, the Harrisburg School District began offering pre-school education in its neighborhood elementary schools for 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds.

Virtually all elementary school students in the Harrisburg School District walk to one of 14 neighborhood schools. "The research is clear that small neighborhood schools lead to higher achievement," says Dr. Gerald Kohn, who was named Harrisburg's superintendent in 2001.

Funded in part with a \$5 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation, the school district in cooperation with Capital Area Head Start offers classes to 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. five days a week. The maximum

"Research shows that when kids spend longer periods of time in the same school, their needs are more personally addressed. We also see more parental involvement in the schools."

- Gerald Kohn
superintendent

class size is 15 children, with two teachers in each class.

Harrisburg has converted all its middle schools into elementary schools, where students attend from pre-school to eighth grade. They then move on to one of the district's 9-12 high schools. "Eleven years of schooling in the same building will ensure for those kids who stay in the neighborhood that they will be known well by teachers, administrators, and their classmates," Kohn says. "Research shows that when kids spend longer periods of time in the same school, their academic needs are more personally addressed. We also see more parental involvement in the schools."

Harrisburg School District:

- * Places its pre-school programs in neighborhood elementary schools
- * 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds have a five-day program from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
- * Children attend the same neighborhood school from age 3 through 8th grade
- * Funded with a \$5 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation

Option 2 - Renovate existing buildings with a mini pre-school center at each one

Estimated Cost: \$20 million

This option envisions renovating all of Pottstown's five elementary schools, including an addition to each school that would house 4-year-old kindergarten (4-K), 5-year-old kindergarten (5-K), and perhaps some younger children.

It would provide all the space the district administration says it needs to conduct its program.

ADVANTAGES:

- Would provide all the space the district administration feels it needs for its educational program.
- Busing students could be reduced or eliminated through redistricting the existing schools if the district is willing to allow some students to walk slightly more than a mile to school, which is permitted by state law. This could save Commonwealth and Pottstown taxpayers up to \$382,000 annually, minus the cost of extra crossing guards on High Street.
- Would keep students in the same school for a longer period of time. Educational research shows children, especially low-income children, do better when they stay with the same classmates and teachers over an extended period of time.
- Would provide a small early childhood learning center close to home and scaled for our youngest learners. This would free up existing K-4 and K-5 space for other programs.

DISADVANTAGES:

- Would not create a downtown elementary school. A walkable neighborhood school could help make the downtown area more attractive to families.

About the author of this report

David Anstrand is an educational facilities planning consultant. He recently retired as construction administrator and director of facilities for the Manheim Township School District in Lancaster County.



David Anstrand

During his 13 years in Manheim Township, Anstrand oversaw the renovation of four historic neighborhood elementary schools as energy-efficient "green" buildings.

An architect with a degrees in architecture and city planning from the University of Pennsylvania, Anstrand serves on the board of the Council of Educational Facilities Planners International, the non-profit organization that establishes "best practices" for the planning and design of public schools.

Anstrand was assisted in researching and producing this report by Thomas Hylton, chairman of the Pottstown Planning Commission. This report was funded by a private foundation.



Option 3 - Build an early learning center in Washington Street corridor

Estimated Cost: \$ 24.8 million (\$9.2 million for the center plus \$15.6 million to renovate Pottstown's five elementary schools)

A new early learning center has been proposed on Washington Street between King and Chestnut streets. A warehouse and several houses would be demolished to build the center.

All 4-year-old and 5-year-old kindergarten students would be assigned to the facility, which would also house pre-school classes. Parents would either have to provide transportation or the children would have to be bused. A community health clinic and or seniors center might also be located at the early learning center.

Pottstown's Head Start program currently has three classes at Transfiguration Lutheran Church, two classes at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, and one class at the Ricketts Community Center.

The Montgomery Early Learning Center currently cares for about 80 children from 6 months to elementary school age at Emmanuel Lutheran Church. The YMCA Day Care program also serves about 80 children in a facility that is rated for 180 youngsters.

Some or all of these programs would be consolidated at the pre-school center.

Along with construction of the facility would come a neighborhood revitalization program, possibly covering as many as 16 square blocks.

Gov. Rendell has indicated interest in providing state grant money for acquisition and rehabilitation in the area.

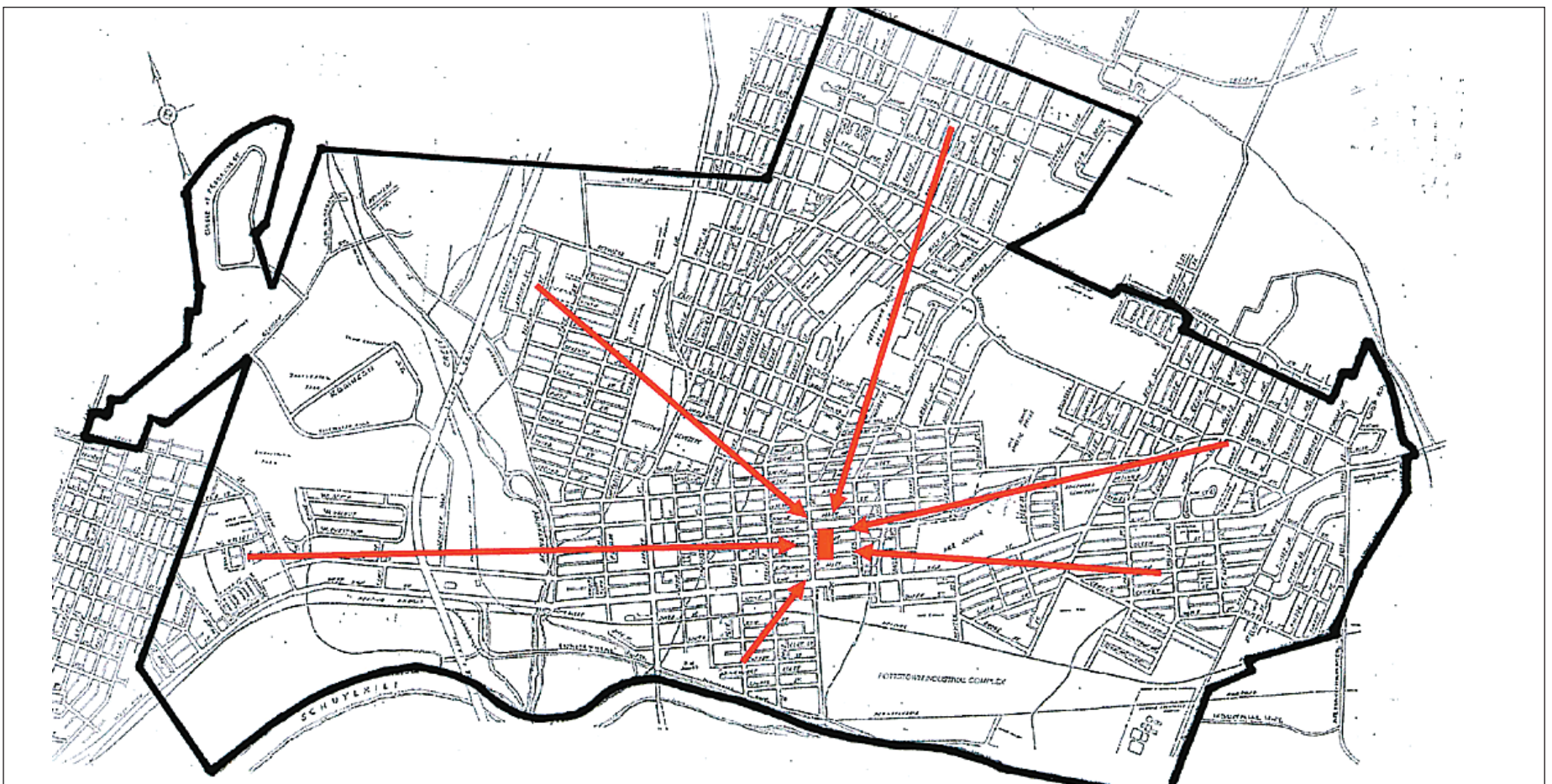
ADVANTAGES:

- Putting all pre-school children under one roof would be an efficient use of space and encourage camaraderie among educators.
- An early learning center could help revitalize the blighted corridor, especially if the government provides financial aid.

- The site would provide a possible place for a health clinic or downtown seniors' citizen center.
- The center could house students from other Pottstown elementary schools temporarily while their school is renovated.
- The school might attract seniors from the nearby high rises for the elderly to assist in children's care and education.

DISADVANTAGES:

- Cost. It is not clear Pottstown needs all the additional space an early childhood learning center would provide.
- Parents would have to provide transportation for their children. If the district needed to bus the children, it could cost tens of thousands of dollars annually in addition to the \$382,000 now spent to bus elementary school students in the regular education program.
- Moving Head Start and early learning programs from downtown Pottstown churches would leave behind vacant space and take away revenue from the churches.
- Many parents may be uncomfortable about taking their small children to a historically high crime area.
- Educational research shows children, especially low-income children, do better if housed in the same school for the longest possible time. Pre-schoolers would probably do better if housed in a neighborhood elementary school or in a facility immediately adjacent to an elementary school.
- Early childhood education, if provided close to students' homes in neighborhood schools, may encourage more parental involvement.



All Pottstown 4-K and 5-K pupils, and other pre-school children, would attend a consolidated early learning center on Washington Street between King and Chestnut streets.

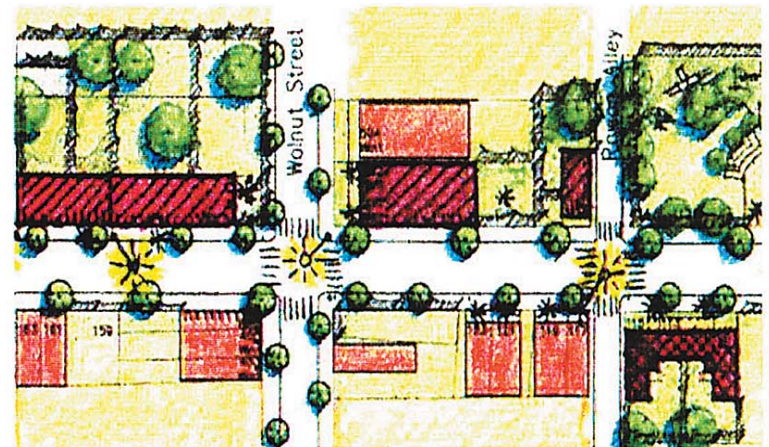


Washington Street Action Plan

Washington Street between High and Lincoln is viewed as one of the most troubled neighborhoods of Pottstown due to its deteriorating physical environment and significant social problems. The Washington Street Action Plan proposed to create a more active stable, and supportive neighborhood for residents and property owners through community involvement in beautification efforts, concentrated community policing (including a new police substation), exterior building upgrades housing rehabilitation and construction, streetscape improvements, and rehabilitation to two mixed use buildings. The plan will also support after school neighborhood activities, reduce absentee landlords, and assist renters to become homeowners.

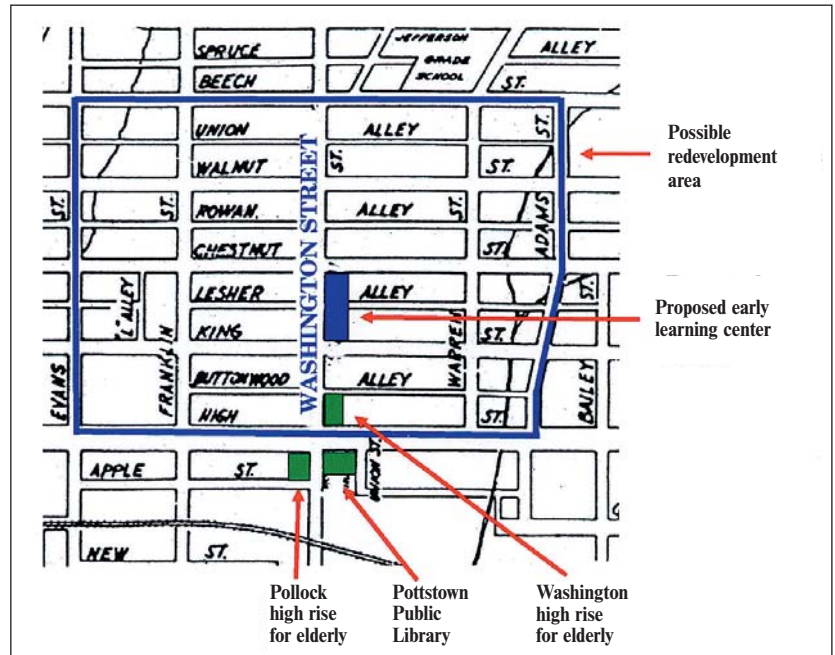
Action Agenda Items:

- Acquire key parcels for redevelopment and rehabilitation.
- Develop and market housing.
- Create police substation and dramatically increase community policing activities.
- Complete streetscape improvements.
- Establish neighborhood-based social development programs.



Washington Street Action Plan Addresses Longstanding Issues

Revitalizing the Washington Street corridor is one of the goals of the Pottstown Community and Economic Development Plan adopted by Pottstown Council in September 2000.



(Above) The proposed early learning center would be a block and a half north of the high-rises for the elderly and the Pottstown Public Library at High and Washington streets.

(Left four pictures) An old dairy building and several homes along Washington Street between King Street and Chestnut Street would be demolished for a new early childhood learning center. The early learning center would be across Chestnut Street from a park constructed several years ago.

Option 4 - Build a new elementary school at High and Evans Streets

Estimated Cost: \$ 24.8 million (\$9.2 million for the center plus \$15.6 million to renovate Pottstown's five elementary schools)

Three years ago, the construction of a new downtown elementary school was proposed by Preservation Pottstown, a non-profit organization dedicated to revitalizing Pottstown and restoring its historic architecture.

Preservation Pottstown believes that a walkable downtown school will help attract middle class families to the downtown, where Pottstown has many historic homes.

The organization suggested using a borough parking lot on Evans Street between High and King Streets. The group engaged the architects who designed Pottstown Borough Hall, Wallace and Watson, to show how an elementary school with a capacity of 500 pupils might be located at that site. An artist's rendering was also commissioned.

In March 2003, Pottstown Borough adopted a redevelopment plan for the downtown area that also envisioned an elementary school at High and Evans streets. The redevelopment plan suggested a downtown school could be a catalyst for redeveloping High Street, especially new townhouses on the south side of the 300 block of High Street and the north side of the 400 block of High Street, perhaps the least attractive blocks of the borough's main street. The plan also envisioned new townhouses on Apple Street, south of the 300 block of High Street.

If those two blocks were rehabilitated, seniors at the two high-rises for the elderly at High and Washington streets might be available to tutor children at the new elementary school. A seniors center might be located at the school.

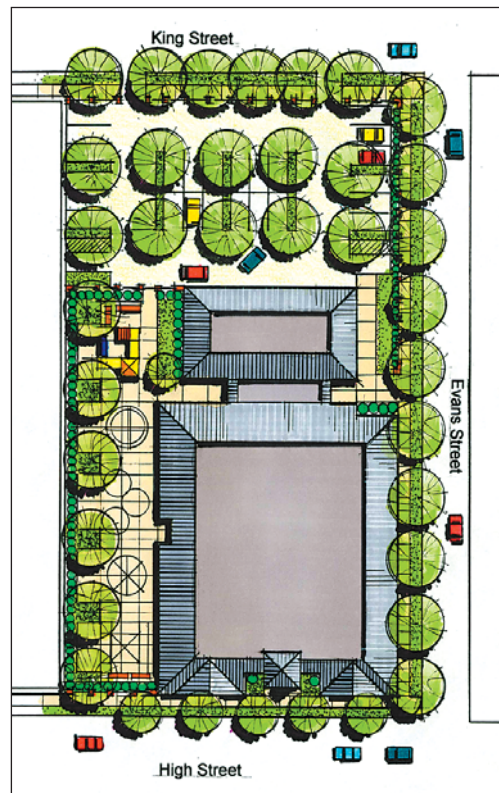
Pennrose Properties, one of the largest non-profit developers of affordable housing in Pennsylvania, conducted a preliminary analysis of the 300 and 400 blocks of High Street and concluded townhouses were viable at that location.

At its meeting Jan. 20, 2005, the Pottstown School Board passed a resolution stating it was not interested in building a new school at High and Evans streets.

No steps have yet been taken to carry out the redevelopment plan. However, Gov. Rendell has expressed interest in providing state grant money for acquisition and redevelopment in the area.

ADVANTAGES:

- Most of the site is already owned by the borough. The parking lot is underutilized.
- The site is centrally located, within easy walking distance of downtown homes where the highest concentration of Pottstown students live.
- A walkable downtown elementary school would make homes in the area more attractive for families with children.
- A downtown elementary school could eliminate the need to bus any regular education students in Pottstown, saving Commonwealth and Pottstown taxpayers \$382,000 annually.



Wallace and Watson, the architects of Pottstown's new borough hall, was hired by Preservation Pottstown to design an elementary school for 500 students at High and Evans streets. There is room on the site for a playground and parking lot.



An artist's rendering of a proposed elementary school at High and Evans streets.

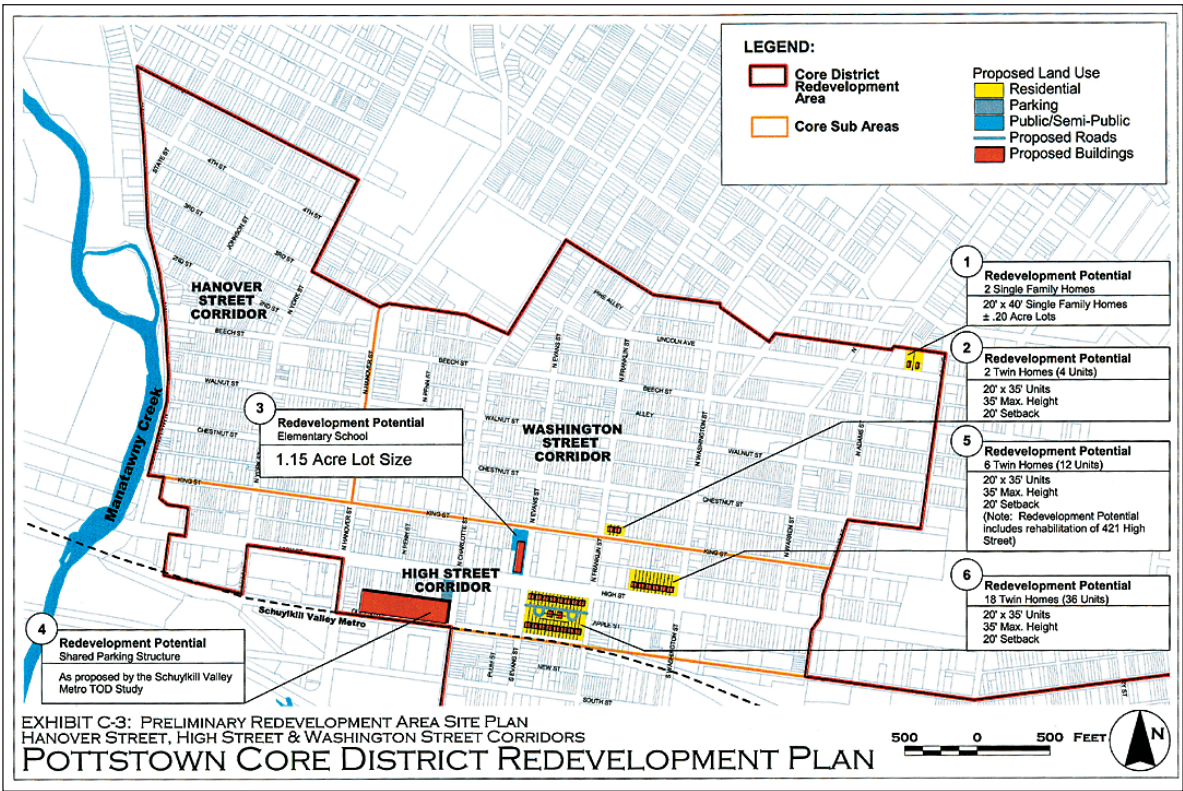


A borough-owned parking lot on Evans Street between High Street and King Street has been proposed for a new downtown elementary school.

- A downtown elementary school could serve as a site for a seniors center or health clinic.
- Because of its prominent location, a downtown school could help revitalize High Street.
- A downtown school could house students from other Pottstown elementary schools as their school is renovated.
- Downtown resources such as the library, borough hall, and newspaper office could be used in a downtown school curriculum.

DISADVANTAGES:

- Cost. It is not clear the Pottstown School District needs all the space a downtown school would provide.
- A school would eliminate future use of a prime corner lot for commercial development.



New townhouses in North Carolina similar to the townhouses that might be built on High Street between Evans and Washington streets.

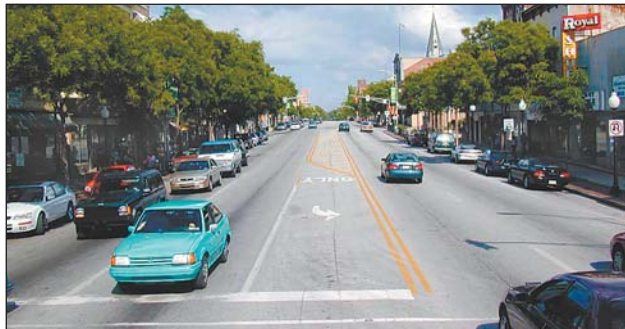


Some of the buildings that would be removed as part of the Pottstown Core District Redevelopment Plan.

(Top) The Pottstown Core District Redevelopment Plan envisions new townhouses to replace deteriorated buildings on the 300 and 400 blocks of High Street between Evans Street and Washington Street.

(Right) With new housing on High Street, seniors living in the high-rises at High and Washington streets might feel more comfortable about walking downtown. They might be available to tutor children at a proposed new elementary school at High and Evans streets.

(Below) High Street today. With back-in-angle parking and bike lanes, the street is now safer and easier to cross. There is now just one lane of traffic in each direction.



High Street in 2002 before two traffic lanes were removed to narrow the street



Option 5 - Create a downtown elementary school using one or more churches or other existing buildings.

Estimated cost: \$16 to \$17 million (\$15.6 million to renovate Pottstown's five elementary schools and \$520,000 to \$1 million to adapt church space for 250 to 500 students)

Pottstown has eleven large, historic churches in downtown Pottstown. Many of these churches added classrooms and multi-purpose rooms to serve large and growing congregations in the 1950s and 1960s.

In recent decades, however, most of these churches have seen a dramatic decline in the size of their congregations. Many congregations are aging. The church classrooms and multi-purpose rooms are vacant much of the time.

One church is in the process of merging its congregation with a larger church. This church building may become vacant in the near future. Another church is seldom used because it has merged with a larger parish.

By either converting one of the churches into a school, or renting classroom space in one or more churches for a school, the Pottstown School District could create a walkable neighborhood elementary school downtown and help preserve the town's historic structures at the same time.

Several churches, for example, have an entire floor under the sanctuary that could be converted entirely to classroom space. Several have additions with classrooms and a multi-purpose room. If a vacant church was renovated as a school, the sanctuary itself could be made into a multi-purpose room or turned into two floors of classrooms, just as an extra floor was added to the former gymnasium of the Pottstown Middle School when it was renovated in 2000.

An alternative would be to rent church classrooms for a school that might be located in more than one church. Many of the churches are within a two or three minute walk of each other. The principal would walk between the buildings. Elementary school students spend most of their day in one classroom. They have library, gym, art, and music once a week. Pupils might walk from one building to another for one or more of these special classes. They might share the cafeteria in one of the buildings. The students might walk to the children's department of the Pottstown Public Library once a week for their library classes.

Walking between school buildings during the day would provide much-needed exercise for students, and the history, architecture, and business activity downtown could become part of the learning experience.

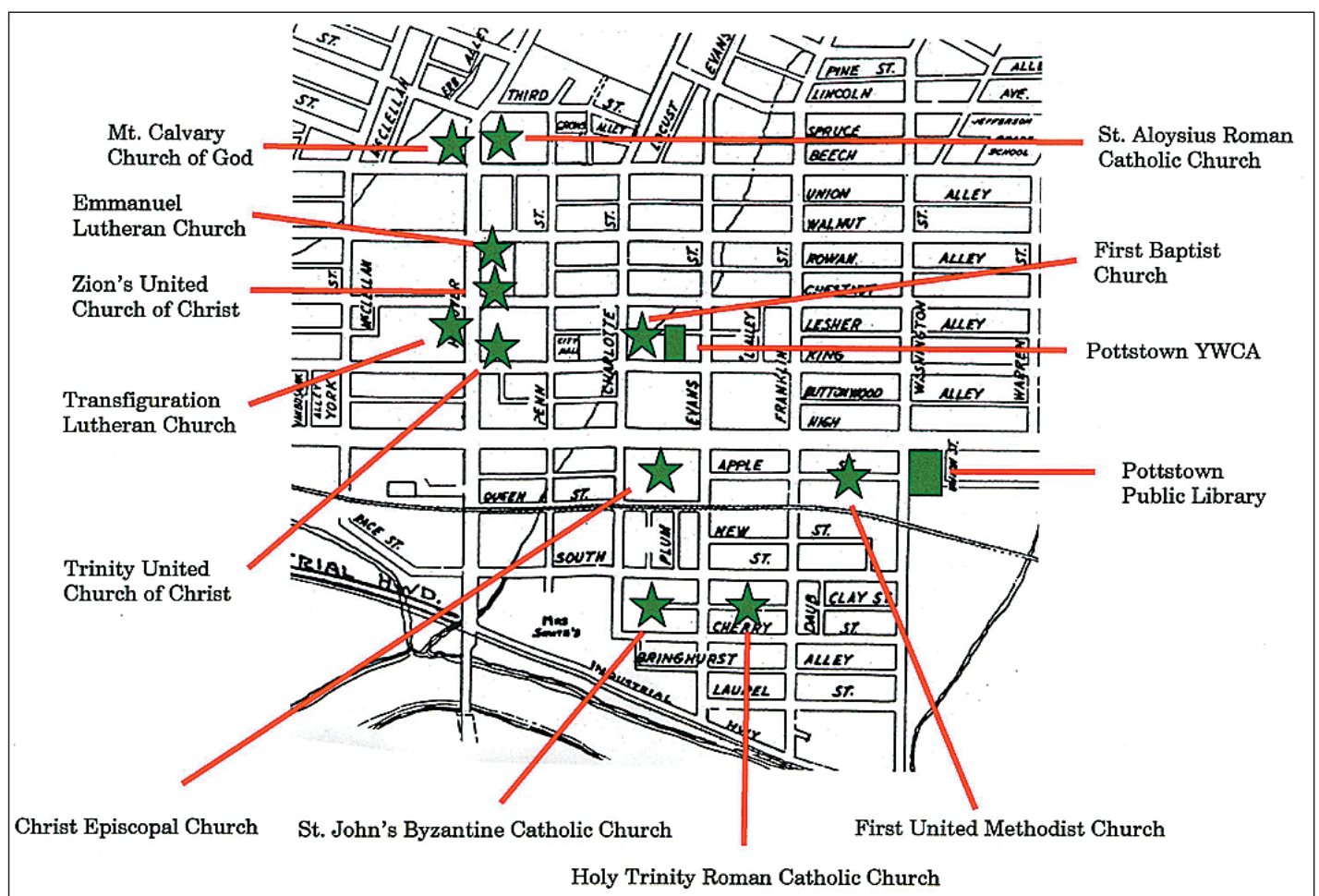
Renting space could be far less expensive than adding classrooms to existing schools or building a new school. The school district could make renovations to the classrooms part of the lease agreement. Churches could make the renovations less expensively than the school district because they do not fall under the prevailing wage law.

ADVANTAGES:

- Using church classrooms could create a neighborhood elementary school downtown that could be as large or as small as the district needed.
- The churches are centrally located within easy walking distance of downtown homes where the highest concentration of Pottstown students live.
- A walkable downtown elementary school would make homes in the area more attractive for families with children.
- A downtown elementary school could eliminate the need to bus any regular education students in Pottstown, at an annual savings of \$382,000, including \$238,000 paid directly by Pottstown taxpayers.
- Using churches would make the maximum use of existing resources.
- Using churches would provide revenue to the churches and help keep them viable.
- Using churches would help preserve magnificent, irreplaceable buildings.
- The downtown could serve as a unique learning environment. Walking would be encouraged.
- Space from the churches could be leased for one year as an experiment to house students from one of Pottstown's elementary schools as it is being renovated.

DISADVANTAGES:

- An unusual degree of cooperation would be needed between the church congregations and the school district to make the program work.
- Creative thinking and scheduling would be necessary. Teacher union work rules might need to be amended.
- The unconventional nature of the school might conflict with the public school culture.



One or more of Pottstown's downtown churches might be used for a downtown elementary school.



First United Methodist Church at 414 High Street has classrooms and a basement gymnasium.



First Baptist Church at King and Charlotte streets has six spacious classrooms built in 1957 with direct access to the street and a small play area in front. The YWCA, with a gymnasium, is next door.



Transfiguration Lutheran Church, which currently houses three Head Start classes, is typical of many downtown Pottstown churches. The church has offices and classrooms on the first floor. A 1950s addition in the rear has classrooms and a multi-purpose room. The sanctuary is on the second floor. If such a church became vacant and was renovated as a school, its sanctuary could be converted into a multi-purpose room, or another floor could be added, similar to the conversion of the former gymnasium at Pottstown Middle School into classrooms and a library.



St. John's Byzantine Catholic Church has a separate school building at South Charlotte and South streets. The five classrooms in the building are currently being leased for Montgomery County Intermediate Unit classes.



Emmanuel Lutheran Church, at Hanover and Walnut streets, currently houses Head Start classes and the Montgomery Early Learning Center. It has ample parking. Immediately next door is a spacious play area owned by Zion's United Church of Christ.



Mt. Calvary Church of God at Hanover and Beech streets until recently operated a private K-12 school on its ground floor.

Summary:

Pottstown can be proud of its commitment to education, but the ability of the local community to pay for new or renovated facilities is an important consideration. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pottstown ranks eighth of 501 school districts in the amount of taxes it raises in proportion to the district's tax base. With declining enrollments forecast for at least the next five years, the school district should weigh carefully how much additional classroom capacity it really needs.

The Pottstown School District must attract middle class families to retain economic diversity. The percentage of low income children has doubled over the last 30 years, to more than half the student population.

Pottstown should capitalize on its strengths:

- Neighborhood schools
- A traditional downtown
- Walkable neighborhoods
- A sense of community

These assets not only create a wonderful learning environment, they create a wonderful living environment as well.



Students walk to the Lincoln Elementary School.



Families walk home from church on historic North Hanover Street.

At present, Pottstown spends about \$382,000 annually to bus regular elementary school students, including \$238,000 paid directly by Pottstown taxpayers. This expense could be decreased or eliminated if more pupils could walk to school. Most Pottstown elementary school children are already within a mile of an elementary school. The rest are within a mile and a half of an elementary school, the recommended limit for children to walk to school.

The highest concentration of Pottstown elementary school students of all races is in the downtown area. With the addition of a downtown elementary school, whether in a new or adapted building, all children should be able to walk to school in Pottstown without upsetting the racial balance of any school. According to the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation, nearly a third of Pottstown children are overweight. Walking should be encouraged to help children get an hour of exercise daily as recommended by the Surgeon General.

An early learning center serving all four- and five-year-old kindergarten students and other pre-school students in the district would require more auto-dependent transportation, whether by private car or public school buses, potentially costing the district tens of thousands of dollars on top of current busing costs. It might require removing existing pre-school classes from Pottstown churches.



A parent walks home with his children from Head Start classes at Transfiguration Lutheran Church.

Pottstown's churches might be explored as a means of creating a unique learning environment and additional classroom space for the school district. Using church classrooms would help support the churches and provide maximum flexibility for the district whether enrollments increase or continue to decrease.

- This report has not been endorsed by the Pottstown School District -

Major options considered in this study

Option	Description	Student capacity	Cost	Total Student capacity	Total cost
1	Renovate existing five schools with minimal additions	1,675	\$12 million	1,675	\$12 million
2	Renovate existing buildings with an early childhood center at each one	2,250	\$20 million	2,250	\$20 million
3	Renovate existing five schools to provide more space per student Build a new early childhood learning center on Washington Street	1,750 500	\$15.6 million \$9.2 million	2,250	\$24.8 million
4	Renovate existing five schools to provide more space per student Build a new downtown school	1,750 500	\$15.6 million \$9.2 million	2,250	\$24.8 million
5	Renovate existing buildings to provide more space per student Lease space from churches to create a downtown elementary school	1,750 250-500	\$15.6 million \$520,000 - 1,000,000	2,000 to 2,250	\$16 to \$17million