Gee leads school to expand, improve

Enrollment at Allendale Columbia has risen some 26 percent since 2012

By LORI GABLE

Michael Gee took the helm at Allendale Columbia School in July 2012, and since then enrollment is up 26 percent, the annual fund has more than doubled and the campus has expanded with the opening of a $250,000 Design and Innovation Lab.

As the academic year begins, Gee is looking forward to more accomplishments for the 126-year-old school, which he prefers to describe as independent rather than private.

“I don’t like to say we’re private. It implies ‘you can’t come here.’ We do derive our funds from tuition, but we are open to everyone,” Gee said, noting 62 percent of students receive financial assistance to attend. “I do like the independent label we have. We don’t have people imposing a curriculum on us.”

At a time in public education when many parents and teachers are frustrated by Common Core teaching methods, Gee said the ability to break free from state Department of Education guidelines is a selling point for Allendale Columbia.

It has helped drive consistent enrollment increases, he believes, which is bucking the current trend at other independent schools across the country. Allendale, in Pittsford, serves nursery through 12th grade and opened this month with 415 students.

The National Association of Independent Schools, a nonprofit membership association that provides services to more than 1,800 schools and associations of schools in the United States and abroad, conducted a recent analysis of enrollment. A survey of enrollment change at 939 schools from the academic years 2006 to 2007 and from 2013 to 2014 showed nearly half lost students over the last decade.

“The school is far more diverse than the past,” says Michael Gee, Allendale Columbia’s head of school. Under Gee, enrollment has increased 26 percent.

“Fundamental knowledge is important, communication skills, critical thinking—we are certainly teaching those,” he said. “We also support more project-based learning. And as students move through the upper grades, we create more opportunity for choice with expanded electives such as entrepreneurship, engineering and arts options.”

Some students own their own businesses, Gee said, and are learning now the skills needed to navigate the global business world later.

There is a global emphasis to the teaching methodology Gee introduced at the school, and it is part of Allendale’s strategic plan that launched last fall. It was

designed by a committee composed of board members, faculty, parents and school leadership.

Board of trustees President Mary Beth Conway, a parent of two Allendale graduates, said she feels the school must have a global perspective with a local focus.

“There is so much to say in terms of what Mick has helped Allendale Columbia to accomplish, from a global perspective and a curricular perspective—and in terms of developing and improving a strategic plan that has already cultivated partnerships with local businesses and organizations to provide authentic learning experiences for our students. It has also provided opportunities for them to make an impact locally, regionally and internationally,” Conway said.

His ability to connect with people on all levels is one of his greatest strengths as a leader, she said. Gee believes that skill can be cultivated in students through exposure to different cultures.

“We want to develop global citizens. It helps our students understand different perspectives,” Gee said. “It’s a language and culture immersion. We need to develop a global empathy.”

The school is introducing Mandarin this fall in addition to the French and Latin it already teaches. Students travel to several countries to learn of other cultures and participate in scientific research projects. They have renovated a school in Costa Rica and helped build houses in Senegal. Next year Gee said they will travel to China and India.

Many of the projects are developed through key partnerships with national organizations such as National Geographic and the Smithsonian Institute.

Diversity is important to Gee, who is a native of the United Kingdom where he earned his bachelor of science degree in chemistry and analytical science. He was recognized there as a national teacher of excellence. He earned his master of education degree from Teachers College at Columbia University. He was selected by the Fulbright Scholarship Program and participated in their Teacher Exchange program.

Gee served as the upper school director and upper school science teacher at Winchester Thurston School in Pittsburgh for 11 years before joining Allendale Columbia.

“The school is far more diverse than the past,” Gee said, adding that the international component of the student demographics is recent. Within the past four years, the school purchased two houses with a total of 18 beds to house international students near the Allens Creek Road campus.

“Our students come from 28 school districts, 45 different ZIP codes and 10 different countries. Thirty percent identify as students of color,” Gee said.

Allendale is reaching more families across various socioeconomic lines as well, he added. The school raised more than $1 million in its annual fund drive last year, helping to provide more financial assistance to students who cannot afford the tuition that ranges from $9,000 to $23,000, depending on grade level.

There are also scholarships based on merit available through contributions to the school from benefactors such as the Gleason family.

Gee believes the best chance at progress is through partnerships, and the school has established more than 50 relationships with businesses, educational institutions and other organizations. A recent collaboration of Rochester Institute of Technology and the Genesee Country Village and Museum led students in a project that resulted in the development of an app. The project was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

“Nobody thought kids could invent things of real use. Now we know they can do more,” Gee said. “They can solve problems by themselves and we have them doing research every day. We’re invested in the community and see ourselves as part of Rochester’s growth.”

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2. Demographic data show an increase in diversity, Rochester Business Journal, bit.ly/rbjincdiv

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