Recruiting measures yield diversity at Rochester private schools

By TODD ETSHMAN

Students and their parents value diversity in their private school education. That’s what they tell school administrators and that’s what they’re likely to find at area private schools such as Harley, Allendale Columbia and Bishop Kearney.

After all, students are likely to be stepping into a diverse college, workforce, neighborhood and society when their school days are over, and they’ll be better equipped to handle a diverse world after graduation because of their grade school experience.

Hassan Jones, head of Harley School’s middle grades, says his school is acutely aware of the need for diverse students, faculty and staff to have others like them in the classroom or on staff at the school.

“It’s important to have leadership that supports diversity efforts both through their actions and words,” explains Jones, an African-American who is part of the school’s diverse faculty.

Diversity is often described in terms of race and ethnicity but it exists in other ways as well, such as in the school curriculum, the faculty, faith and socioeconomics.

At the Harley School and others, the school’s commitment to diversity is broad and includes religion, gender, geographical origin, sexual orientation and economic status in its mission statement.

Achieving diversity is accomplished through a variety of measures and recruitment programs not solely devoted to diversity.

Jones says Harley School is guided by principles set forth by the National Association of Independent Schools to focus on areas of diversity in the curriculum, but otherwise there are no rules or student body quotas, just best practices that have served the school well in recent years.

The Horizons at Harley summer learning program, for example, has expanded over the years to reach nearly a thousand low-income, urban area students today. The program collaborates with other summer learning programs across the region for students from first through 12th grades.

Many independent schools still struggle with diversity overall in their school environment, but Allendale Columbia School headmaster Mick Gee says a lot of progress has been made at his school in the past 20-30 years, which coincides with the different way students receive and relay information today.

Headmasters and private school administrations today—along with their students and parents—are doing a better job of making sure there is diversity in the school environment, according to figures presented by the NAIS.

Diversity in faculty, however, is harder to achieve than it is in the student body. Finding and keeping a diverse faculty group is regarded as more of a challenge. A big reason is public schools pay faculty and staff higher salaries.

Just like the students they teach, private school teachers and staff members don’t want to be the sole representative of their cultural or ethnic group and they help get the word out to others that the private school is open to recruiting them.

One way the Harley School attracts diverse faculty is through attending the annual People of Color Conference held by the NAIS, which also includes student participation. The conference trains school representatives how to attract and retain faculty of color and serves as a good source of highly qualified diverse faculty.

At Allendale Columbia, students are a part of the school’s faculty hiring committee.

“We’ve made great strides (with faculty and staff) in the past few years and with the student body in the last 20 years,” says Gee. “But it’s always a work in progress.”

Gee believes his school is as diverse as any school in Rochester despite a lingering misperception that the school

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is primarily for students from affluent backgrounds. The flags of over 60 countries representing students who have attended Allendale Columbia School over the years are displayed on campus. Students of color make up over 30 percent of the school population. In addition, students come from 50 ZIP codes, 30 school districts and 12 countries.

“We want to reflect the population around us, not just the population of Pittsford and Brighton,” Gee explains. Abundant financial aid programs mean the school can attract students from a low-income background, helping to alleviate what he believes is one of the biggest challenges facing city schools: a lack of socioeconomic diversity.

City resident students can be found at Bishop Kearney and Harley School, too. At Bishop Kearney, partners in foreign countries help recruit students to come to the school from 13 countries.

“The kids think that’s the way it should be, but it’s really the Kearney experience. Other schools can’t offer that,” says Kearney enrollment management director Fred Tillinghast. Since there aren’t nearly as many Catholic elementary schools feeding into the student population today as there were in the past, the school has had to look elsewhere—including globally—for students.

In an era of declining private school student enrollment nationwide, the school’s student body has increased the past five years. That bucks a two-decade trend of decreasing enrollment in northeastern Catholic school enrollment according to figures published in March by The Civil Rights Project at UCLA.

Their female hockey team attracts players from all over the country. It helps that they can live in a Bishop Kearney dormitory along with other diverse students.

“We are diverse in so many ways,” says Bishop Kearney’s president, Stephen Salluzzo. “It’s an opportunity for our students to embrace differences in people throughout their entire time here at Kearney.”

Faith is an element of diversity at Bishop Kearney despite its Catholic Church affiliation. Parents want their children to be part of Kearney’s tradition whether they are Catholic or not, and the school welcomes students of any faith.

“A special part of our school is our religious diversity,” Salluzzo explains. The campus is a place where students can find what faith means to them, although the school asks that students witness the Catholic sacrament.

“Diversity will always be a component of what we do here,” says Salluzzo. “How that’s delivered depends on who’s receiving it.”

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**Enrollment**

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past eight years, bringing the total to 270 in this school year. The school accepts students from 21 months through sixth grade.

Head of School Lorraine Scarafile says Trinity Montessori’s style of instruction is a big draw for parents and students. The Montessori method allows kids to follow their own interests and work at their own speeds in multi-age classrooms, either as individuals or collaboratively.

“I think people are happy to have an alternative education that is so specific to the individual needs of the child,” Scarafile asserts. The school’s 2011 move to a new building has also been a plus, according to Scarafile. Twice the size of Trinity Montessori’s old digs, the approximately 30,000-square-foot structure was designed specifically to meet the school’s needs and those of its students. Classrooms are larger than before, and have bathrooms and other elements that facilitate instruction—including kitchens.

“We do a lot of cooking,” Scarafile explains. Trinity Montessori also added a new room for 2-year-olds, allowing the school to accommodate as many as 80. Programmatic changes might also have drawn more students.

“We have intentionally increased our offerings,” Scarafile explains. “I think people appreciate and are looking for that.”

Trinity Montessori now offers robotics, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programs, STEAM programs (STEM with an arts component) and others.

Enrollments are also on the upswing at the Rochester Christian School.

“The past five years, we’ve seen a nice, steady climb,” says principal Michelle Selvaggio.

Rochester Christian, a preschool-eighth grade institution in Penfield, currently has 184 students on its roster. The school’s faith orientation is a big draw for parents.

“First and foremost, what we promote is that parents who are Christians...want their children to be influenced by Christian teachers who are talking about how all of truth is God’s truth, and are educating in our faith tradition,” she says. “That’s not something you can get at a public school.”

The 2016 closing of the K-12 Webster Christian School helped bring in new students, according to Selvaggio. Even as its enrollments continue to rise, Selvaggio admits that Rochester Christian does face challenges. For one thing, tuition comes to just over $5,000 a year.

“Although it costs us less to educate a child than they spend in public school, we can’t charge what it costs us, because that would be cost-prohibitive,” she says. “It’s always a challenge to get enough people who can afford to send their kids here.”

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