

# After calling off merger, Allendale Columbia finds new financial footing

By **DIANA LOUISE CARTER**



**AC students compete in robotics.**

The last time Allendale Columbia School held a fundraising campaign, it reached its goal of \$4 million in three years.

But when the private school announced last spring that it was contemplating a merger with The Harley School, parents reacted by spearheading another campaign to keep Allendale Columbia independent.

They raised \$3.3 million in a mere five months and expect to meet their goal of \$4 million by the end of the school year without a problem.

The two schools announced last July that they wouldn't merge after all and School Head Mick Gee said then that Allendale Columbia had some work to do to figure out the way forward.

Now it appears the school community has done just that.

"We did have a groundswell of parent and community support who came out very loud and clear ... we wanted to remain independent," said Shannon Baudo, director of enrollment and assistant head of school. She's also the incoming interim head of school.

Gee said, "Some of those parents have looked at the program at Harley and looked at the program at AC and they picked AC." They wanted to be in the best STEM school in Rochester, he said.

Parents and alumni took the merger announcement as a call to action, Gee said, offering to help out more than they had in the past.

The resulting support included \$1.5 million from Ursula Burns, the former president and CEO of Xerox, and a former AC parent and trustee. Another \$1 million came from a current AC family that wishes to remain anonymous.

Burns, in a prepared statement, said her donation "represents my admiration for the school's history and its commitment to providing an outstanding education to a diverse student body. It is my hope that this gift inspires others to give to the school and support its drive towards sustainability."

At the time that an intended merger was announced, both schools noted that Harley was in the stronger position financially, and that school would take the leadership of the joined schools. Indeed, since the merger was called off, Harley announced it has successfully completed a campaign of its own.

AC meanwhile, had to do more than raise money.

"As a school, we also had to do some right-sizing," Baudo said. Since the economic crisis of 2008, the

school is down about 80 students; enrollment is now 339. Harley has approximately 500 students.

As part of its right-sizing, AC cut the equivalent of 14 full-time employees, though no teacher lost a job. Some positions were vacated through normal attrition and aren't going to be replaced, the school heads said. In all, the school cut its spending by \$1.5 million.

As a result of the changes, the school expects to end this fiscal year with a surplus for the first time in 11 years, and is projecting balanced budgets for the next three years.

Both Gee and Baudo participated in a nationwide research project at the National Association of Independent Schools on financial sustainability that they said had been instructive.

In January, Baudo said, the school plans to start a marketing campaign to recruit more students — some were lost over the uncertainty about the merger — and let people know AC has come through its financial worries well.

"With all the uncertainty in the spring around the merger, we didn't have one faculty or staff leave," Gee said. "We lost no one."

But there is one person who will be lost — Gee. Due to the length of time it takes to complete a school head search, Gee accepted a job for 2020-21 during the period when it looked like his job at AC would be phased out in the merger. In June he'll complete his eighth year at Allendale Columbia and then become the school head at Rowland Hall, a private school in Salt Lake City. His family is already there so his daughter could complete both junior and senior years at the same school.

Perhaps most valuable in going through the process of considering and rejecting a merger is the strength of feeling supporters realized they had for AC. And the school affirmed that its unique programs — including centers for entrepreneurship, global engagement, and STEM and Innovation — are a big draw.

"People came here for those programs, so they wanted to make sure that those programs and the opportunities those programs afforded for kids would be maintained through the merger as well," Gee said.

Wendy Dworkin, parent of a junior at AC, said her son switched to that school from Harley after sixth grade because his learning style really leaned more toward STEM and business subjects, but he wanted to be able to satisfy his interests in history, too.

"He didn't have to give up his love of history to be in a STEM school," she said. "During May term they



**AC students harvest honey from the bee hives they built and bees they raised as part of an ongoing multifaceted science project**

may be involved in actually running a TedX conference. They can have internships with businesses. There are some amazing businesses and out-of-the box thinking they can have access to."

Dworkin wasn't one of the parents who led the charge on the campaign, she said, but she was concerned that

her son would lose faculty members or access to programs in the merger. As he started looking at colleges, it was uncertain whether the teachers who knew him best would still be around to write him letters of recommendation, she said.

In addition, there was conflicting information about what would happen in the merger, or lack of answers to some questions because decisions hadn't been made on some things, which frustrated parents, Dworkin said.

Indeed, Gee said there are still misunderstandings today, even about whether the schools are merging.

"Everyone took it as a done deal, but it wasn't a done deal," Gee said. AC from the beginning had a group working on a contingency plan for how to keep going if the merger didn't work out.

Though the two schools had signed letters of intent to merge in the spring, before their respective boards actually voted on merging in July, the schools planned to first invest several months in research about what a merger would mean.

The period of research led to Allendale Columbia deciding to go it alone.

"It was clear if cuts were to be made — they would be on the AC side," Gee said.

Baudo and Gee said financial aid at AC is more generous than at other private schools in the area, and parents were concerned about whether AC's levels of financial aid would continue for students who need it.

Alumni weighed in, too, asking whether they'd have a campus to return to — the question of two campuses was never resolved. Baudo said the school even heard from some Columbia alumnae who had been through the merger of the then-all-girls school with the all-boys Allendale in the 1960s.

Dworkin said she feels better now about the way things have settled out. "They do send the parents regular updates from the chairs of the board. (They are) basically restructuring how they conduct their business on a daily basis so they are more sustainable, without affecting the actual teaching," she said.

Gee said he's glad to leave the school on more solid financial footing.

"If I have to leave, that's a good place to leave," he said.

[dcarter@bridgetowermedia.com](mailto:dcarter@bridgetowermedia.com)  
 (585) 363-7275



**Head of School Mick Gee and Assistant Head of School Shannon Baudo**