

# Schools focus on students' physical, emotional wellness

By AMARIS ELLIOTT-ENGEL

Whether students at Allendale Columbia School are sitting in the courtyard with masks on or eating lunch together — socially distanced, of course — Shannon Baudo, interim head of school, says that the school “has tried to keep things as normal as possible during a time that is not normal.”

Nothing about education is normal during this public health crisis, according to local school leaders, but they say that addressing student wellness and empowering students in terms of their social-emotional development is important so they can achieve their intellectual growth and academic development.

Theodore Mancini, principal of The Aquinas Institute of Rochester, says that resilience is important for student wellness.

“We got thrown in the middle of this huge teachable moment where everything we thought was normal doesn't exist anymore,” Mancini says. “At Aquinas, we teach problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration. We're in the middle of one of the biggest lessons of problem solving, critical thinking and

collaboration that we've ever been in.”

Sister Diane Dolce, founder and executive director of Hope Hall School, says that COVID-19 has presented challenges to the school's philosophy, which is that given enough time in the right learning environment, any student can learn well. The students at Hope Hall tend to not qualify for special education because their IQs are too high, but they do not succeed in traditional classrooms where lessons are primarily verbal because of their learning challenges.

Dolce says that if these students are taught differently by being provided a “very predictable environment that's built specifically to address their learning challenges, then they can learn as much and as well as everyone else.”

Dolce says one of Hope Hall's key values is perseverance, and it is a value that students have turned to even though Hope Hall has had to modify its “very predictable environment” in light of COVID-19.

Hope Hall students frequently were bullied prior to coming to the school, and “for the last 26 years we've defined wellness as encom-

passing body, mind and spirit. COVID didn't trigger those values for us,” Dolce says.

For the current semester, Hope Hall has opted for a hybrid model in which students are attending school in person part of the time and online other days.

With 130 students at the school, the hybrid number was necessary to ensure the safety of everyone, Dolce says.

Students now spend the entire day in their classrooms, but teachers are doing yoga or stretching activities or playing music for breaks. Students have lunch in their classrooms six feet apart, and they take short walks as a class.

Dolce notes that many students of Hope Hall are Black, and they have been affected by the double stressor of the COVID-19 pandemic and the deaths of George Floyd and Daniel Prude and the ongoing issues of racial justice in the United States.

But a central value at Hope Hall is hope, Dolce adds.

“We take the word hope very seriously,” Dolce says. “We are taking the best of science and are erring on the side of caution and doing everything we can to keep everybody safe to help the kids, faculty and staff to embrace hope as we are taking care of their bodies, minds and spirits. What is now is not all that there always is.”

Baudo says, “We know through

research about social-emotional well-being that any time a child feels safe and important they are going to take academic risks and feel ok if they stumble along the way.”

Over 90 percent of Allendale Columbia's 353 students have returned to campus for in-person evaluation, but “before the pandemic we took for granted being on campus” in the school's wooded residential setting, Baudo says.

Allendale Columbia has made adjustments so that students won't miss any school if they attend virtually, including being able to attend extracurricular activities virtually.

All students in the middle school and upper school have advisory programs in which they can meet with a small group with peers.

“That's a time to connect on goals,” Baudo says. “That is a time to discuss mindfulness and current events and how we should be thinking about them, how we should be engaging individually. It's also making sure students know there are many people they can go to beyond their parents at home or their peers.”

For Aquinas Institute's 711 students, Mancini says the focus is the whole child's mind, body and spirit.

“Health and wellness plays a big part of this,” Mancini says. “We made a really considered decision



Baudo



Dolce

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to bring all of our kids back for in-person learning, and to do so we made a lot of adjustments.”

The adjustments included in better filtration systems and daily cleaning.

Socialization in person is a huge part of having students be healthy and happy and being able to learn, Mancini says. It also is important for students to have an outlet to talk to someone outside of their homes, whether it is teachers, counselors or friends, Mancini adds.

Aquinas just had a pep assembly. The 11th and 12th graders participated outside, socially distanced, at the stadium and other students could participate remotely.

“It wasn’t perfect,” Mancini says. “It wasn’t everything that the kids wanted to have, but there was a sense of joy and an understanding that we were making an effort to at least do something to bring students together.”

Elizabeth Murray, parent of an 11-year-old attending Allendale Co-

lumbia and a pediatrician with the University of Rochester Medical Center, says that her daughter and the other students at Allendale Columbia are doing fine with wearing masks, having health screenings done before schools and substituting competitive athletics with other schools for intramurals.

“The concept of building resilience is so huge because we all face adversities in life,” Murray says. “Right now, as a community, our adversity gone through the roof. Ev-

eryone is experiencing so much right now.

“There’s just this normal grieving process,” she adds. “Being able to fall back on that community at Allendale Columbia is a really great stabilizing force, which helps with being a resilient child moving through these really big changes we’re all experiencing right now in our lives.”

*Amaris Elliott-Engel is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*

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implemented and the students are complying.

“Right now, we keep on keeping on,” Geraci says. “If something does happen it isn’t because we didn’t give it our best effort.”



Baber

McQuaid Jesuit High School Principal Adam Baber stressed to students when

they attended orientation in September that it was a privilege to be able to attend in-person five days a week. He notes, however, that families were given the option for remote learning if preferred, which some students are currently participating.

“We stressed it’s a privilege to have in-person classes daily, and,

like anything, else that privilege could be lost if we don’t do our part,” Baber says.

McQuaid’s ability to hold in-person classes all week has led to increased enrollment, Baber says, noting the school experienced its highest new enrollment figure this year since 2015.

The school used the abbreviation AMDG, with is the Latin motto of the Society of Jesus, which means “For the greater glory of God,” to highlight elements of compliance that would be crucial to this school year, Baber says.

The A stands for awareness of one’s health and safety; M is for masks; D is for distancing; and G represents the greater good, Baber explains.

While Baber thought there may be push back when it came to mask wearing, he notes students are doing well complying to the mask mandate. The masks are worn throughout the day, with exceptions

at lunch and at certain times called mask breaks, which is up to each teacher’s discretion.

McQuaid also adopted the phrase “masks on tight, stay to the right,” as a reminder to wear the facial covering properly and be mindful of how one navigates through the school to comply with social distancing requirements.

When it comes to distancing, the school has decreased class size and made additions to its teaching staff to accommodate the change, Baber says.

To help encourage social distancing during lunch, McQuaid added lunch locations, including the field house and gym, as well as outside — weather permitting — for seniors.

Lunch periods were also shortened and may be cut further since the students tend to finish their meals in a timely manner, and longer break times could encourage group gatherings, Baber says.

The school also lets students know they share in the responsibility of keeping others safe.

“Everyone has a part to play when it comes to keeping cases (of COVID-19) as low as possible,” he says.

McQuaid’s nurses have been crucial when it comes to dealing with compliance issues this year, Baber notes.

If students are experience COVID-19 symptoms, they are required to get a test and have it come back negative before returning to campus.

As of early October, McQuaid had referred 86 students to their primary care providers for COVID-19 testing and all were negative.

“We have been fortunate so far, but we need to stay very diligent,” Baber says, noting colder weather and the flu season are on the way. “It will likely be a long year but there is an underlying sense of gratitude to be back.”

*Andrea Deckert is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*

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