Private schools report uptick in enrollment as pandemic continues

By TODD ETSHMAN

Early this summer, Forbes and CNBC reported private school enrollment gains after years of pre-pandemic slow to no gains in enrollment.

A major factor in heightened private school enrollment is the belief that private schools have a greater ability to remain open or at least provide more in-person education than public schools despite the fact that they’re subject to the same COVID mandates.

At private schools such as the Harley School there is little frustration or disagreement between parents, students and the school about COVID protocol.

Harley has its own health advisory board, which includes doctors and lawyers. COVID protocol at Harley includes requirements such as teachers and staff must be vaccinated.

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Frye says has been extremely helpful. The advisory board consists of parents, including doctors and lawyers. COVID protocol at Harley includes requirements such as teachers and staff must be vaccinated.

“Teachers have the freedom here to dive into the program and not be held to state standards,” Baudo explains. “They have the freedom to be more creative and flexible and in getting to know their students and what’s best for them.”

A private school environment with innovative curriculum and more in-person learning is important to parents and students today. It comes at a price, but area private schools are offering students millions in financial aid.

The Harley School had a 7 percent increase in enrollment this school year, and added two classrooms and four more teachers and staff members. Finding and hiring enough teachers isn’t a problem for private schools, but the shortage of food service and maintenance workers affects private schools, too.

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Private schools note improved mental health for students learning in-person

By AMARIS ELLIOTT-ENGEL

At Hope Hall School, student wellness has increased dramatically because all of the students are now in-person, says Carol White Llewellyn, who works in advancement at the school.

Llewellyn notes that Hope Hall uses a multisensory program to educate students and that was virtually impossible to implement with some students learning remotely.

"We try to bring it to them in a way that all of their senses are used, or at least as many senses as possible," Llewellyn says. "That's virtually impossible with remote learning."

Hope Hall educates many students who do not qualify for special education because their IQs are too high, but they do not succeed well because of their learning challenges in traditional classrooms that are primarily verbal.

Hope Hall is not the only private school in the Rochester region reporting that student wellness and mental health has vastly improved during the COVID-19 pandemic because schools are able to have students back in-person — albeit with masks and with social distancing.

Bishop Kearney High School’s 393 students have been back in-person for a year or so.

"I think students need to be with each other," says Emma Yatteau, a social studies teacher and the director of the school’s house program. "We are social creatures from our inception."

Even with masks and social distancing, "there is joy in the classroom again," Yatteau adds.

"Teachers and other staff used to battle with students to give up their cellphones, and now after having been on their phones at home for a year and a half during the pandemic they realize being present in-person is better, and students are expressing gratitude for that," Yatteau says.

One key aspect of Bishop Kearney’s culture that was hard to replicate virtually is its house system in which everyone needs a sense of belonging.

"The house system's goal is to create opportunities to foster relationships and interconnectedness within our diverse school community," Yatteau says.

Mary Martell, Bishop Kearney’s interim principal, says that student well-being has also improved because parents and other visitors are now allowed back in the building.

"It allows us to do a little teachable moment about what it means to be vaccinated," Martell says.

Martell says older students who have been vaccinated have thought that they no longer needed to wear masks, but the school has been educating them that, even if they are vaccinated, they can still get sick or possibly spread the virus to other people, causing them to fall ill.

Emily Cady, director of counseling and wellness for Our Lady of Mercy School for Young Women, says that Mercy is prioritizing the need for stronger relationships within the educational community.

"We are working on reinforcing the beauty of human communication and the long-term benefits related to supporting young women at every stage of their development," Cady says. "We know that academic engagement soars when students feel connected, respected and an authentic sense of belonging within the community itself."

Cady notes that, even before the

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**Technology resources prove valuable to keep students on track amid pandemic**

**By ANDREA DECKERT**

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Allendale Columbia School was able to use some of the resources it already had to help continue its mission.

Shannon Baudo, Allendale Columbia’s Head of School, says the school was able to utilize more of its extensive 33-acre campus during the COVID-19 pandemic, giving students the opportunity to get some fresh air and enjoy the outdoors during the school day.

A range of activities and classes were offered in the outdoor setting. Students in the upper school were able to have photography classes outdoors, as well as recreate battle simulations for history class. Middle schoolers participated in outdoor team building activities and the students in the lower school set up camp chairs outdoors and read.

“Students were thriving in the outdoor setting, enjoying being outside with their friends in a beautiful setting,” Baudo says. “It has worked so well; we plan on using it more and more.”

Private schools were among all academic institutions that had to quickly adapt to the pandemic, including navigating remote or hybrid learning, as well as following social distancing requirements.

Many found that some of the practices that were incorporated over that time were successful and are likely to continue for the near future.

Like many schools, Allendale Columbia relied on technology last year to assist with instruction efforts. That included the use of Zoom.

While the video platform does not replace in-person interaction, Baudo believes there are times when Zoom can be useful post-pandemic.

For example, Zoom may help with accessibility to school events for families who may not be able to attend an in-person evening event due to being out of town for work or because of challenges related to childcare.

Having the virtual option available may allow more people to engage in school activities, she says, noting the more parents that are involved the better the school experience can be.

“Zoom may never fully go away, and that’s OK,” she says.

In addition to utilizing its campus and applying technology to improve overall communication and instruction, Allendale Columbia placed a greater emphasis on the social and emotional needs of its 325 students, as well as the needs of faculty and staff, during COVID-19.

While social and emotional well-being was always a priority, it was even more in the forefront during the height of the pandemic, she notes, adding that enhanced focus will remain moving forward.

“This time reminded us that we need to take care of each other,” she says.

In response to the pandemic and its impact, Allendale Columbia is re-evaluating its advisory programs and adjusting accordingly.

The school has also added two full-time social workers — one dedicated to the lower school and the other for the middle and upper schools — to help provide coping mechanisms, guidance and social and emotional support to students and their families.

Some examples of resources provided so far include grade-specific parent support chats with the school’s counselors, as well as weekly and bi-weekly, or by appointment, parent meetings with teachers and division heads.

The counselors can also aid faculty, including offering support and advice on how the faculty can best serve the needs of the students by helping them to talk about, and work through, the challenges they are facing and the emotions they are experiencing.

Baudo says emotional and social wellbeing is critical to academic success.

“If the students aren’t there emotionally, the academic piece won’t come,” she says, noting a top priority is making sure the students feel welcome, comfortable and safe. "The school provides so much more than just the academic piece.”

Rochester School for the Deaf also made some adjustments last year because of COVID-19 that remain in place. Some are even being used more than they were pre-pandemic.

The school — in its 145th year — welcomed roughly 140 students back to five-day in-person instruction this fall. Its theme for this school year is “Re-connect,” with a focus on moving forward.

Officials said RSD will also reconnect with its strategic plan this school year, which includes a focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, academic rigor, family and community partnership and student experience.

Susan Ogden, principal for grades 1 to 12 at RSD, says staff now have more knowledge of digital platforms for teaching and learning. They also have a better understanding of how to use them more effectively with students.

For example, Google Classroom, which streamlines the process for sharing files between teachers and students, has been, and continues to be, used more than in the past, she notes.

Karen Windhorn, the school’s early childhood programs and kindergarten director, says family and staff have been more connected as a result of the past 18-plus months.

“We are able to offer more support remotely,” she says, adding that a...
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The Harley School decided against raising tuition this academic year. “We didn’t know how the pandemic would affect families ability to send their kids to a tuition charging school,” says Frye.

Todd Eshelman is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

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pandemic, the mental health and well-being of youth in the United States was in a fragile state.

“Escalated levels of anxiety, depression, chronic tension, school avoidance and debilitating fatigue were being reported across the globe in young people, with especially startling data regarding the emotional mental health of young women,” Cady says. “Since spring 2020, the mental health in youth has continued to deteriorate rapidly. Some researchers speculate that the long term consequences of the pandemic could include stunted academic, social and emotional development.”

That’s why Mercy is prioritizing the need for stronger relationships within the educational community, Cady says.

“We all wish that we could flip a switch and avoid the exhausting journey of the collective transition to the ‘new normal’ that awaits, but we can’t,” Cady says. “Educators must approach this year with grace, forgiveness, wonder, hope and mercy, placing one step in front of the other and helping each other along the way.”

At Hope Hall, another advantage of being back in-person is that the 135-student body can participate in-person in the daily community meeting led by the school’s founder and executive director, Sister Diane Dolce, Llewellyn says. Dolce shares messages focused on acceptance, perseverance, love, understanding and hope.

Llewellyn notes that many students were bullied at other schools before they came to Hope Hall because of their learning challenges, and 85 percent of students who attend the school live in poverty.

“I think starting the day out like that gives the kids a message that infuses their entire day in an atmosphere of accepting other kids and accepting things and understanding that they can achieve,” Llewellyn says.

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parent cannot leave work for a meeting, it can be done virtually via Zoom. “This helps with everything being visual and in American Sign Language.”

Virtual programs are also seeing an increase in popularity among parents, according to RSD Superintendent and CEO Antony A.L. Mcletchie. That includes having more parents taking ASL classes remotely through the school’s Signs for All ASL learning program, he says. Paula Guardalben, director of admissions for the Charles Finney School, says technology enhancements enacted during the onset of the pandemic and used last year, will continue to be available for students.

The school — which has an enrollment of nearly 240 students — had purchased Chromebooks to make sure that students were equipped for online learning. It had also installed cameras in every classroom so that students had the opportunity to keep up with lessons even when they needed to stay home due to illness or exposure.

By the end of August, the school had also purchased a new fleet of Chromebooks for the upcoming school year.

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