

Columbia area private schools grow as parents seek in-class teaching during COVID-19 crisis

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COLUMBIA — Midlands parents are turning to private schools for students in record numbers, lured, administrators say, by the stability of a traditional academic calendar and full-time in-person classroom learning.

As the coronavirus pandemic has thrust public school districts into murky reopening timelines — Richland County’s main two districts remain fully virtual for now — leaders at private schools say they have robust wait lists.

Overall, the South Carolina Independent School Association, which represents 123 schools serving 30,000 students, has seen total enrollment rise by 1.5 percent this year, a dramatic turnaround from spring predictions that warned of double-digit enrollment drops.

“We had heavy traffic in the middle of the summer in a way that we don’t usually have, so the demand was incredibly high,” said Chris Hinchey, Head of School at Heathwood Hall in Columbia.

The Episcopal school admitted 730 students this year, and almost 19 percent of them — 135 — were new. In-person classes began Aug. 14.

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“We have wait pools for first grade through 10th grade, and many of those people applied for this year,” said Suzanne Nagy, Heathwood’s enrollment manager.

Social distancing guidelines has sliced classroom sizes at the Columbia school from 20 to around 13, tamping down the potential to bring even more students on board.

Hallways at Hammond School in Columbia are more crowded as well. Enrollment at the K-12 school is up by 6 percent over a typical year, reaching 936 students.

More than a quarter of South Carolina Association of Christian Schools members reported enrollment bumps of at least 2 percent this year, although 23 of the 68 said admittance dropped by at least that much, executive director Edward Earwood said.

“Enrollment-wise, it’s about where I thought it would be,” Earwood said. “I think our schools are faring well. You never knew what was going to happen, but every one of our schools are up and operating (on five-day schedules).”

Lexington’s Northside Christian Academy took more than 200 new applications over the summer and the school’s largest-ever wait list.

“This has been the strongest enrollment year we’ve ever had,” Northside Head of School founder Scott Crede said. Of the 765 students admitted this year, 100 are new.

Northside Christian started the year Aug. 31 on a five-day schedule and offered a remote option that 26 students chose at first, but nearly all of them are now back on campus, Crede said.

“I think if you came here and a stuck a microphone in our kids’ faces, all of them would tell you they’re happy to be back at school,” Crede said.

The trend could help offset a bleak financial outlook that included an estimated tuition loss of nearly \$34 million in 2020-21 for 135 private schools across the state, according to an South Carolina Independent School Association survey in April.

“People for the most part wanted their children to go back to a five-day-a week safe environment, so I do believe firmly that was one of the drawing points for parents who quite frankly never thought about independent schools,” said Spencer Jordan, the association’s executive director.

It’s possible private schools could see one-time assistance from the state, although that’s currently tied up in a legal battle.

In July, Gov. Henry McMaster designated \$32 million for private school tuition from a federal COVID-19 fund he controls. The program, designed to give parents a one-time voucher of up to \$6,500 per student, has been blocked by a lawsuit as of Oct. 5.

“We expected (parents) to be frustrated with the lack of a choice, which is why the governor pushed for a full, five-days-a-week option in each district,” McMaster spokesman Brian Symmes told The Post and Courier in August. “It naturally follows that they’d look for an alternative.”

“You’ve got parents who’ve got to get back to work,” he added. “They’re put in a position they’re having to choose between their child’s education and their own jobs.”

Across the country, more than 120 private schools have been mothballed this year as a result of coronavirus shutdowns, and 57 percent of those still open have reported enrollment drops, according to a Sept. 28 survey by Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

In South Carolina, Jordan credits McMaster’s decision to reopen businesses here ahead of many other states for helping with that fact in South Carolina.

“If the economy didn’t bounce back and if it continues to improve, I fully believe that you will see more increases in enrollment in independent schools,” Jordan said.

With more attention being paid to non-traditional schools, it's a good opportunity for them to stay viable even when the coronavirus pandemic dissipates, said Ed Hoffman, who runs Trinity Collegiate School in Darlington.

"We can market in all the local papers and radio stations but our best marketing is always going to be word of mouth. That's actually how we picked up some kids from public school," Hoffman said. "Once they had a chance to experience the difference, they told their friends and neighbors about the program."

Crede agreed.

"We believe if we do a great job this year, they're going to want to stay, but I do believe across the board that's a question we're all asking ourselves," he said.

In the Palmetto State, around 70,000 students go to private K-12 schools, versus nearly 780,000 in public schools. Tuitions can be as high as \$20,000 a year, but the average rate is \$6,100 for elementary schools and \$7,100 for high schools.

"We have seen a portion of our parents articulate an urgent need for face-to-face learning, and that's been a percentage of our traffic that's already started for next year articulating kind of a re-examination of the importance of education and the importance of institutions to provide some stability for that journey," Hinchey said.

It's why golf carts were a common sight on Heathwood Hall's 122-acre campus in the summer, shuttling would-be students and their parents through the school's loblolly pines and dozen themed playgrounds, past a living bee colony and into classrooms for campus tours.