

## Allendale Columbia calls off its merger with Harley

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Three months after announcing a merger with the Harley School, the trustees of Allendale Columbia voted to reject the idea and said the school would remain independent after all.

The merger was a response in part to declining enrollment and difficulty in fundraising at Allendale Columbia, the smaller of the two east-side private schools. It had been discussed on and off for decades; the two schools already

share an athletics program and some other activities.

Allendale Columbia Head of School Mick Gee said Tuesday that parents had largely been opposed to the merger, and that several potential donors to the school had surfaced in the wake of the news.

“We’re an independent school — people chose AC for certain set of reasons, as they did Harley, and when you go through a process like this those choices come from the forefront,” he said.

Allendale Columbia Board Chairman Charlie Symington told parents and alumni last month that the school would “likely be forced to close in the relatively near future” if it didn’t merge with Harley. The school has had multimillion-dollar operating deficits for at least eight years and has seen enrollment fall by about 21% since 2003-04.

“As I am sure you understand, the board did not make this decision rashly or without due consideration of all reasonable alternatives at our disposal,” he wrote in an email June 1. Even a “save-the-school” campaign, he said, would not change the long-term calculus.

“The fundamental issue keeps coming back to demographics and the ability for our area to support two mediumsized independent schools when there is also strong public and parochial school competition,” Symington wrote.

The new press release promises that Allendale will “reinvent itself operationally and make necessary and innovative changes in order to achieve longterm sustainability.” Those changes have not yet been finalized, Gee said, but will include restructuring of the governance model.

“The demographic challenges still exist in Rochester; the financial challenges for independent schools are national,” he said. “We’ll need to go quickly from here into all those areas.”

Harley Head of School Larry Frye said he only heard the news Tuesday morning, hours before a press release was sent out.

“We did not see it coming,” he said.

Harley’s enrollment and financial situation has been stable compared to Allendale Columbia’s; Frye said the cancelled merger doesn’t hurt Harley.

“We have come into this in a really strong position,” he said. “We are happy to carry on with our core mission. ... We’re on kind of a roll, so we’re surprised by this but we didn’t really need a contingency plan because we’ve been doing well.”

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