

# Catholic high schools expand

## They now accept sixth-graders; give families options

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Catholic high schools in the Rochester area have all recently expanded to accept sixth-graders, a change that presents more options for families — and a possible headache for elementary schools in the Diocese of Rochester.

Until three years ago, Aquinas Institute, Bishop Kearney, Our Lady of Mercy and McQuaid Jesuit high schools were all grades 7-12. Children in parochial elementary schools stayed there until sixth grade before switching; public elementary schools mostly end after fifth grade, meaning those children needed a one-year stopgap if they wanted to attend a Catholic high school beginning in seventh grade.

That situation changed in 2012, when McQuaid and Mercy both welcomed their first sixth-grade classes.

For McQuaid, it was in response to an indication

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**KELLY WEGMAN**

PARENT



**Caleb Ryan, 11, draws his idea for a science project on the board in David Demers' sixth-grade class at McQuaid Jesuit. McQuaid has been accepting sixth graders at the school since 2012.**

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**John Parker, 11, center, raises his hand to answer a question in David Demers' sixth-grade class at McQuaid Jesuit.**

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### Schools

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from the Diocese of Rochester — later rescinded — that its elementary schools would stop offering sixth grade. For Mercy, it was a desire to align better with the public elementary schools and with the prevalent national model of a 6-8 middle school.

Both schools saw great demand for the sixthgrade offering and expanded enrollment there; Mercy president Suzanne Johnston said her school has a waiting list.

They also both take care to keep sixth-graders physically removed from the main high school population, lest they get trampled.

“We have little guys next to our 300-pound offensive tackles,” said John Finn, McQuaid Middle School dean. “We wanted to keep them separate.”

Starting this fall, Bishop Kearney and Aquinas, the other two local Catholic high schools, will add sixth-grade classes, as will Siena Catholic Academy, a diocesan middle school on the St. Thomas More church campus.

Aquinas had been partnering with nearby K-6 school Nazareth Academy, but found parents preferred an earlier switch to high school. “It’s a decision time for families,” Aquinas President Michael Daley said. “If they’re considering a private Catholic school, they tend to make a decision to go in sixth grade. ... Parents felt like a stopoff for one year (at Nazareth) wasn’t adequate for their children.” Aquinas will maintain its partnership with Nazareth, letting students choose whether to attend sixth grade as the elder pupils of an elementary school or the small fry at a high school. Bishop Kearney came up with a different arrangement with its elementary neighbor, St. Kateri. The latter is eliminating its sixth grade, and the two schools have developed a continuous curriculum to help the transition from one to the next.

“They’re a tenth of a mile down the street from us,” said Bishop Kearney President Tom O’Neil. “I think it’s natural for people.”

While most public elementary schools are K-5, all parochial schools, with the new exception of St. Kateri, are K-6. Now that the high schools are providing competition for sixth-graders, elementary schools are likely to face even greater pressure on enrollment.

Combined sixth-grade enrollment at the parochial elementary schools has fluctuated over the last three years: 239 students in 2012-13, 282 in 2013-14, 226 in 2014-15. Siena is also struggling with enrollment: about 180 current seventh- and eighth-graders, compared to about 400 five years ago, principal Martin Kilbridge said.

It is attempting to position itself in the middle, catering to families who desire a standalone threeyear Catholic middle school. And its addition of a sixth-grade class compounds the difficulty for parochial elementary schools. “This is really an essential move for us,” Kilbridge said. “Students have always had a good experience here at Siena, but it’s been short. ... We think many sixth-graders are ready for the challenges of a middle school education.”

Kelly Wegman of Hilton has a son in fifth grade at St. Lawrence in Greece. She and her husband were wary of sending their sixth-

grader to Aquinas, their alma mater, because he would be with such older students. But a visit to an open house changed their minds.

"I think it will make it an easier transition down the road," she said. "There are some people who can't decide whether to keep them (at St. Lawrence) or try them somewhere new so they won't be behind when things get started in seventh grade. ... People worry if you bring them in seventh grade, the social groups will already have been formed."

Diocesan elementary schools can decide for themselves whether to shut down sixth grade; Diocese of Rochester spokesman Doug Mandelaro said St. Kateri is the only school to have made that choice.

The Catholic high schools' alignment with public elementary school grade levels is also contributing to a demographic change. Nearly 80 percent of students at McQuaid and about 90 percent at Mercy now come from public schools, a huge increase from the time when large student bodies at parochial schools could fill the seats at Catholic high schools.

The percentages are lower at Bishop Kearney (a little more than 50 percent public school students) and Aquinas (32 percent), but the trend is the same.

"It's really important for tuition-based schools to not rely solely on diocesan feeder schools," Daley said. "If their enrollment is declining, our enrollment will be under pressure as well. We really need to market to public schools."

The four boys in the Malik family, now in grades 5-8, typify that trend. They attended elementary school in Greece, but the older three entered McQuaid as sixth-graders in successive years and the fourth is now cramming for his entrance exam.

"It just worked out in every way with our desire to give them a solid Catholic education," said their father, Amanuel Malik. "You talk about stability — we have it."

The pitch to prospective public school families, who may not be practicing Catholics, is different as well.

"The most important thing to (public school families) is a good academic education," O'Neil said. "The fact we're Catholic doesn't mean as much to them as it does to the diocesan families."

None of the school leaders characterized their collective expansion and recruiting of sixthgraders as competitive — perhaps "politely competitive," McQuaid dean of admissions Joe Feeney conceded.

But their convergence on a common model will surely have implications for families, students and the diocesan elementary schools many of them attend.

"It's an interesting dynamic," Kilbridge said. "But I hope in the long run it benefits all Catholic education."

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