

Private school needs \$150,000 to stay open

Stung by charters, Cobblestone tries crowdfunding

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As it turns out, a honeybee can teach you plenty.

That's the recent experience of students at Cobblestone School in Rochester's Neighborhood of the Arts, a little-known but much-loved Rochester private school that needs an immediate infusion of cash to stay open.

The kids studied the bees' anatomy and how they fit into their environment. They drew pictures, came up with a song and dance, created their own beehive and planted wildflowers to help keep the little buzzers fat and happy.

They also made a public service announcement

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Barbie King, a Cobblestone School kindergarten teacher, helps third-grader Jaden Donahue into a beekeeper suit during a visit to Sweet Beez on Exchange Street last week.

LAUREN PETRACCA/@LAURENPETRACCA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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for Sweet Beez, a Rochester nonprofit organization dedicated to urban beekeeping, and they presented the whole package of learning at the group's headquarters on the west bank of the Genesee River last week.

After giving their presentation, the students went on the building roof and checked out the honeycombs, swatting and dodging the docile bees. Their parents and school leaders hope the current \$100,000 problem can be addressed as easily.

The school was founded in 1983 with an emphasis on small class sizes, interdisciplinary learning and independent assessments — students do not take state tests. It's the only private non-religious school in the city.

Its enrollment has dropped precipitously in the last decade, from about 160 students 10 years ago, when it was prekindergarten through eighth grade, to 37 now, with sixth grade as the final year, co-director Sara Shaw said. There are four classroom teachers and five adjunct teachers.

Some of the loss has gone to charter schools, and it partially reflects declining enrollment across Monroe County.

Tuition is on a sliding scale up to about \$12,000, Shaw said. Such a small student body makes it difficult to pay the bills and invest in programs.

"We can't weather the things other schools can because of our small size," she said. "But it's our small size that makes us unique."

The school needs about \$150,000 in additional funding to stay open, Shaw said. A fundraiser on tilt.com had garnered \$50,000 by Monday afternoon.

Drew Washburn sends his 5-year-old daughter Zhia to kindergarten there. She tugged at his arm to go watch her classmates dance while he explained his family's attachment to the school.

"It boggles my mind why there's not more demand," he said. "It's a really unique asset in the city given the public school climate. ... We can deal with the uncertainty when there's such a rich reward."

Shaw said it's not the first time the school has faced a fundraising challenge. It already reached out to parents and is looking for major donors to help with the rest. She gave no deadline, but expressed hope the school can swat the problem like a honeybee that strayed too far from the hive.

"This is the bottom of a trend and we hope to get back on the rise," she said. "We plan to be here next year."

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Cobblestone School students watch a public service announcement they made for Sweet Beez.

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