

Private schools brace for financial hit

Educators push ahead with online learning

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Since Our Lady of Mercy High School closed for the coronavirus pandemic, ninth-grader Molly Topa’s daily routine has changed plenty.

She studies in the kitchen, or on her porch in warm weather, rather than at school. She’s mostly done with her work by the end of the school day, giving her more free time in the afternoon.

Unlike most of her public school peers, though, some other elements of her day have remained constant. For example, her day begins at 7:53 a.m. on the dot — not when she rolls out of bed, or when she gets around to logging online.

Exactly 7:53 a.m., just as it would in school.

“It’s definitely different, but it still works,” she said. “I just follow my school schedule like I normally would.”

Since March 13, when the first local school closures were announced, Rochester-area private schools have stood out for their emphasis on continuing with normal academic plans as much as possible.

Bell schedules

A survey of local private schools showed teachers and students logging into virtual “classrooms”



Our Lady of Mercy ninth-grader Molly Topa works on her theology class assignment while enjoying the sunshine on the patio in the backyard of her Rochester home April 1. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Schools

greater financial threat than budgetstrapped public schools.

according to the same bell schedule they would follow at school. New curriculum is introduced and grades are recorded on assignments and exams. Even inherently communal activities like chorus and theater have been roughly replicated online.

Some public schools, having first ensured all their students had access to computers and the internet, have begun to follow the same course. Brighton, for instance, is grading students on new material, while Greece is grading some assignments “exceed/pass/ fail.”

Private schools, though, committed sooner and in some cases have hardly missed any instruction at all — an approach born both of privilege and necessity, and one that their families say they appreciate.

“I have friends in public schools and they’re concerned about kids and families just like us,” Lars Kuelling, academic dean at The Harley School, said. “We’re just trying to do our part.”

Bracing for financial hit

Private schools have a number of distinct advantages in their quest to continue with coursework. Few of their students lack internet access at home — or, for that matter, lack homes altogether, as thousands do in Rochester and other public school districts. Parent participation is a given, and students with disabilities or English language learners are few.

At Hillel Community Day School in Brighton, Head of School Tracie Glazer and another administrator created an online classroom platform for their 75 students in about a week, based on Moodle software. It has live instruction for all grades in all subjects, as well as daily prayers.

As a result, Glazer estimated that students are getting about 90% of their normal academic program.

Glazer said her school and others were bracing for a “massive hit” from the pandemic. Part of the strategy for remaining open, she said, is simply maintaining enrollment for the fall.

At the same time, nonpublic schools face an even

Critical fundraising events are being canceled and wealthy would-be donors are besieged with requests from across the community. Parents who lose their own jobs might not be able to afford keeping up with tuition payments.

More broadly, the entire proposition of private schools is based on the idea that they offer something that public schools cannot. So while a public school district might announce relaxed measures in response to COVID-19, private schools must maintain their distinctive appeal to ambitious parents.

A similar dynamic is in place with charter schools. Many of them, particularly those with an emphasis on no-nonsense academic rigor, have pushed ahead with online instruction much more vigorously than the Rochester City School District, which focused first on students’ nutritional and safety needs.

More than just coursework

The schools are careful to note that their continued focus on academics does not come at the expense of social-emotional needs and other supports for students.

“We’re trying to be bigger than just school,” Harley’s Kuelling said.

That means making sure that counseling services have migrated online along with math and science classes. Harley has set up online meetings for parents as well as students. Last week, Mercy declared a “wellness Wednesday” and asked students to step away from their computers and get outside.

“They’re keeping a sense of lightness and fun with the kids,” said Rachel Healey, whose daughter Harper goes to Harley. In fact, Healey and others said that maintaining normalcy in academics is an important part of caring for students during the crisis.

“They’re reassured by that familiarity, the fact that school is going on in some way,” she said. “It’s business as usual.”

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