

Small private schools promise solutions for anxious families

Some parents look for places with smaller settings for instruction

Justin Murphy and Jeff Platsky

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Most school districts in New York are planning to open in September with some version of a hybrid model, with a few days of in-person instruction each week and the rest online.

Teachers and many parents have warned that returning to school is a health risk and have called for entirely remote instruction. On the other end of the spectrum are parents who want five days a week of in-person instruction for their children.

Those parents can find willing partners in the many small non-public schools that exist throughout the state — if there's still any room for them.

Private religious and secular schools, many of them serving just a few dozen students in highly intimate settings, often face a daunting challenge in retaining enough enrolled students to stay open under normal circumstances.

During the coronavirus pandemic, however, their small size has been a virtue.

“We have the best ideal situation for the least ideal life situation right now,” said Jennifer Kremer, principal of the 80-student Nativity Preparatory Academy in Rochester. “We can do what other schools can't just by the nature of our student body, our larger, older building and the staff we have.”

Kremer said Nativity has been receiving calls every day from parents anxious to secure in-person education for their children. It has started a waiting list for them. So, too, has St. Mary's School in Canandaigua.

“We're preparing the school to meet all the requirements,” he said. “People have been approaching us; I hope some join us.”

Private schools led the way in ramping up their online education last spring, motivated by a need to prove their worth to tuition-paying families.

Their ability to open fully this fall is valuable for the same reason, but has more to do with enrollment and building space.

“We're all getting phone calls every day to see if we have room,” Kremer said. “We all have huge buildings and low student population, and we've made all the accommodations we possibly can.”

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James C. Smith is president of Nativity Preparatory Academy. The school will be back in the fall and has about 60 students in grades 5-8, which allows for easier social distancing. Teachers will also wear face shields and move from various classrooms during subject changes instead of the students. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“The response has been very, very positive,” said Lisa Milano, principal at St. Mary’s. “People are looking for face-to-face instruction. They’re looking for schedules that meet their needs because they have to work.”

Still need to have plans approved

Just like public schools, non-public schools must have their plans approved by Gov. Andrew Cuomo. They have the same requirements in making sure there is enough space for social distancing, enough cleaning and a plan for pivoting to online learning if necessary.

Rabbi Moshe Shmaryahu of Hillel Academy in the Binghamton area said he has received a great deal of interest, but no enrollments yet. Last year it had 19 students in grades K-5.

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