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School choice

Families weigh education options

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BLOOMINGTON -- Lauren Lackovich didn't let her friends change her mind when she decided to switch high schools before her senior year. She transferred from Normal's University High School to Central Catholic High School in Bloomington because, she said, it met her needs "athletically, academically and spiritually."

"It was one of the best decisions I ever made," said Lackovich, a sophomore at Canisius College, a Catholic school in Buffalo, N.Y., that gave her a full volleyball scholarship.

Lackovich is part of a growing number of students attending parochial and other private elementary and secondary schools in Bloomington-Normal and elsewhere in Central Illinois. While there always is an ebb and flow of enrollment because of birthrate, almost all private schools are experiencing growth, a trend that, for some, has been going on for years. Several have seen enrollment increase by more than 100 students in the last decade and one, Cornerstone Christian Academy in Bloomington, has 10 times more students than it did just eight years ago. It's not because of dissatisfaction with public schools which, especially in the past two years, have been hit hard by staff and program cuts.

"We have excellent public schools in Bloomington-Normal so it's just a matter of choice," said Chuck Schanaberger, director of development at Central Catholic High School.

Administrators at private schools agreed the area has good public schools, and said their enrollments are increasing for other reasons:

- Natural population growth in Bloomington-Normal
- Personal beliefs/faith
- Family tradition
- Desire for smaller class sizes
- Newer buildings/updated facilities

UP ALL OVER

While private school enrollment is on the rise, the same can be said for the overall Twin-City area public school population. Official enrollments won't be available until Sept. 30, but current estimates show District 87 and Unit 5 schools will have a total of 16,835 students when classes begin Monday. Of that total, 11,500 will be attending schools in Normal-based Unit 5. That would be slightly higher than last year. This is a result of natural population growth that also affects private schools, said educators.

Enrollment at Epiphany Catholic School in Normal has increased by 50 percent in the last 10 years, going from 300 students in 1995 to 455 when school opened Friday. Still, Catholic school enrollment in the Twin Cities, expected to be 1,535 this year, is less than 10 percent of the public school total. Epiphany Principal Richard Morehouse attributed it to local population growth and more people wanting a Catholic education. That education comes at a cost.

Tuition varies at private schools. At St. Mary's Catholic School in Pontiac, church members pay \$1,180 per student while nonmembers pay \$2,830, said principal Sharon Warfield, adding enrollment continues to grow. At Epiphany, the cost is similar, about \$1,850 per student for church members and \$2,650 for nonmembers.

Mulberry School has the highest full-time tuition fee among the private schools topping out as just over \$4,000.

KEEPING THE FAITH

Faith is a key reason parents choose a private school education.

"A Christian worldview is important to a lot of folks," said Tim Abney, Calvary Baptist Academy, which has students from 43 churches.

Bloomington's Cornerstone Christian Academy is represented by students from 65 churches and some who don't go to any church. Every grade has Bible classes, not religion classes, because there are so many different Christian religions in the school. The curriculum "certainly comes from the spiritual," said director of development April Kinzinger.

"We've grown every single year," she said, noting that is in contrast to a nationwide decline in enrollment at Christian schools.

The school has 10 times more students than when it opened eight years ago with 45 students. Outgrowing its space, Cornerstone moved to a new location less than two years ago and is ready to embark on an expansion to double the building's size. The academy is introducing Grade 11 this year and its the first Grade 12 graduating class in 2007. Further expansion is planned on 78 acres at the east end of Bloomington. The school may eventually have between 700 to 800 students.

"It's on God's timetable," Kinzinger said.

Faith also is the foundation for Pontiac Christian School that has students from 18 churches in the area. Enrollment in the pre-school to eighth grade school has remained fairly steady at about 100 students. But that may change soon: A large class of 4-year-olds prompted the school to open its third campus at the First Baptist Church in Fairbury this year -- further strengthening the school's relationship with other local churches, said administrator Sue Brakeville.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

For some parents, tradition and family values also play a part in choosing private education. Some families have attended Central Catholic High School in Bloomington for generations and wouldn't think of sending their kids anywhere else.

"It could be in a trailer, and they would come," said Schanaberger.

But it helps that CCHS is only three years into a new \$10 million school on Bloomington's east side. The school had a goal of enrolling 200 students by year 2000, but there are 355 enrolled this year.

"Families sharing with other families" is what increases enrollment here," said Peg Hayden, interim director at Blooming Grove School in Bloomington.

For example, Indian and Asian families told others about how much they liked the school which has led to a rapidly growing population of Indian and Asian students at Blooming Grove, said Hayden.

SMALLER IS GOOD

Despite their growing enrollments, private schools are smaller -- something that appeals to many families. Some students, Schanaberger said, "do better in a smaller structure," citing an increased comfort level and a better chance at participating in team sports.

Often, public school classes are larger. Class sizes in Unit 5 have increased in 2004-05 with elementary schools averaging about 22 students -- up one student -- and high schools averaging about 27, said John Pye, assistant superintendent of operations. Following its board guidelines, District 87 tries to hold kindergarten classes to 20 students, 22 in first grade and average 25 in grades two through five. Averages in high school are 25 to 30.

Small classes are one of the biggest reasons parents and students choose Cornerstone Christian Academy. While the 8-year-old school is growing, class size isn't. "All classes are limited to 20 students," said April Kinzinger, director of development. "The reason parents come to us is we are very strong academically."

Small classes also draw students to Trinity Lutheran School in Bloomington. Classes have between 20 and 22 students, said principal Shawn Hoffman.

At St. Mary's Elementary School in Bloomington, classes range in size from 8 to 19 students.

At Mulberry School -- a pre-kindergarten to second grade school in Bloomington -- the teacher-student ratio for half-day pre-kindergarten is 10-1 and kindergarten classes have no more than 14 students. The alternative school, established in 1971, has 80 students and has one of the highest private tuition rates in the area. Parents also must spend 50 hours a year at the school as part of its cooperative approach, said academic director Brenda Nardi. The school is planning to expand to include third grade but will need more space first, she said. "If you will build it they will come," Nardi said.
