

Some private schools benefit, others close due to COVID-19

BY MARA HOPLAMAZIAN
mhoplamazian@sacbee.com

As public school districts navigate the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, attending a private school in Sacramento County

may seem like a solution for families in search of assurance around what the upcoming year will hold.

But the severe economic and social turmoil from the pandemic has weighed on the fortunes of private schools as well.

Some have seen an increased demand for enrollment, while others have had to close their doors permanently. Some parents can no longer afford tuition, and religious private schools have seen far fewer donations.

Now, with Gov. New-

som's directive last week effectively shutting down access to public and private schools until the virus spread is lessened, private schools are regrouping and planning for more uncertainty.

Ron Reynolds, executive director of the Cali-

fornia Association of Private School Organizations, said the impact of the pandemic on private schools has been "all over the place."

The Brookfield School, a private elementary school in Sacramento, has seen a large increase in

interested families, said Brookfield Principal Jo Gonsalves. Within the past month, Brookfield has received approximately four times the interest in admissions than the school generally sees, she said.

"I've been basically inundated with parents calling and emailing with questions," said Gonsalves. "Most of them start out asking what our COVID-19 policy is."

Interested parents are

SEE SCHOOLS, 15A

FROM PAGE 3A

SCHOOLS

concerned about the safety of in-person learning if students return to campus and the thoroughness of online instruction if schools continue distance learning, Gonsalves said.

However, Gonsalves said, the increased interest may be a false bubble. "Even if we do get the students, I'm not sure they would stay with us," she said.

For some of the schools within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento, which operates 42 schools that serve 13,500 students across 11 counties, the pandemic has had a different impact, said Lincoln Snyder, the executive director of schools for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento.

One Catholic school operated by the Diocese, Mercy High in Red Bluff, closed permanently after the start of the pandemic.

so they haven't been donating, or donating as much."

Few families have dropped out of the schools run by the Diocese because of concerns about money. But the longer the pandemic lasts, the bigger the impact will be on families, Snyder said.

The average private school tuition in California is \$14,551, according to Private School Review. For families facing the economic impact of COVID-19, it may be an additional cost that's hard to bear.

Brookfield will continue to use the same need-based financial aid policy it has used historically, said Gonsalves.

Enrollment at the Sacramento Country Day School is down about 5% from last year, said Emily Allshouse, a representative from SCDS.



ALIE SKOWRONSKI askowronski@sacbee.com

Christian Brothers High School admissions director Kristen McCarthy talks on July 15 about the Sacramento private school's hybrid plan to reopen in the fall and how it has seen an increased interest in enrollment during the coronavirus pandemic.

list disclosed by the Treasury Department and Small Business Administration of borrowers that received at least \$150,000.

creased significantly," Oliver said in an email.

Hannah Dooley, a parent who moved to Auburn in late May, said that she's enrolled her third grader in St. Joseph Christian School for the upcoming year.

Dooley said some of the

of flexibility offered at their current school, the program itself, or the kinds of communication parents received regarding the fall.

in-person classes more quickly this fall.

"According to the governor's protocol, once we're clear to reopen we can reopen, whereas public schools might find themselves with other considerations beyond just the public health mandate," Snyder said.

The Sacramento Bee previously reported that Sacramento County Health chief Dr. Peter Beilenson said he would give the same guidance to private schools as he gave to public schools.

The state's plan for reopening says that local health officials may grant a waiver to allow elementary schools to begin in-person instruction. Local health officials must consider local data that includes the number of new infections per 100,000 residents, the test positivity rate, and the change in the rate of hospitalization, as well as consult with the California Department of Public Health.

"We could not get the enrollment or the fund-raising we needed to operate the school for another year," Snyder said.

Enrollment in California private schools, and particularly in religious schools, has been dropping for nearly 20 years. The number of California students enrolled in religious schools dropped from around 506,000 in 2000 to about 339,000 during the 2018-19 school year.

Private schools accounted for 7.4% of total school enrollment in California for the 2015-16 school year, the most recent data available from the California Department of Education.

A Sacramento Bee review of enrollment in the Sacramento area showed that private schools served approximately 12,210 students in the area in 2018.

TUITION RELIEF EFFORTS

Most of the funding for schools in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento comes from tuition and philanthropy, Snyder said. Some schools have seen an increase in parents requesting financial aid in the short term, and philanthropic giving has dropped.

Without a collection basket going around, or with far fewer attendees because of social distancing, parishes don't have the donations they usually rely on.

"COVID has had a big impact on church attendance," Snyder said. "And

"We don't have exact data on the reasons those families left, but anecdotally we get the sense that some families are experiencing financial hardship due to the pandemic, or were not wanting to pay tuition for a program that might be remote," Allshouse said in an email.

In addition to the \$2 million in tuition assistance that the school ordinarily offers, Sacramento Country Day has also offered additional assistance specifically for families experiencing financial difficulties due to the pandemic.

Christian Brothers High School, part of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento, has implemented a new COVID-19 tuition relief fund to assist families who have been impacted by the pandemic, said Kristen McCarthy, the director of admissions at Christian Brothers.

The school made \$500,000 available in COVID-19 tuition relief, but the need for aid exceeded the available funding. All families who requested aid received 75% of what they expressed the need for, McCarthy said.

Sacramento Country Day School and Christian Brothers High School both received Paycheck Protection Program loans from the federal government.

Sacramento Country Day received a grant of between \$1 million and \$2 million, and Christian Brothers received a grant of between \$2 million and \$5 million, according to a

The Paycheck Protection Program was created by congress to assist companies impacted by COVID-19 after the pandemic began. The program has distributed hundreds of billions of dollars in loans that are forgivable under certain circumstances.

Private schools have faced criticism for accepting the loans, which were meant to help small businesses keep employees on their payrolls.

"With enrollment down from last year, the PPP loan has enabled us to keep all of our teachers employed and at their current salaries," Allshouse said.

The loan helped Christian Brothers keep everybody employed, McCarthy said, including the school's maintenance crew and administrative assistants.

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Some Catholic schools have seen an increase in interest from parents, said Snyder. Many interested parents "see private schools, and Catholic schools in particular, as being inherently flexible," he said.

St. Joseph Catholic School in Auburn has seen an increase in interested parents, said Jenny Oliver, the principal of St. Joseph.

"Because our distance learning content and procedures were so well-received and compared favorably to other families' experiences, I have had many inquiries regarding our school. The interest has certainly in-

reasons she decided to enroll her child in St. Joseph were the smaller class sizes and the detailed plan for how the school would conduct distance learning that Oliver provided over the summer.

"It looked like they had it pretty figured out," Dooley said.

Christian Brothers has also seen a number of families interested in transferring, said McCarthy. Some said they were dissatisfied with their current school's ability to transfer to distance learning during the spring.

Catholic schools that are affiliated with the diocese were able to transfer quickly to online learning in the fall. "We jumped from distance learning from one week to the next," Snyder said.

Many private schools had the resources to get students set up for distance learning more quickly than other schools in the spring, with the help of smaller class sizes, technology device programs that provided every student with a device, and funding from tuition or donors to quickly ensure that all students could get online to learn.

Though enrollment has dropped at Sacramento Country Day, applications have stayed steady, said Allshouse. The school has seen a larger number of interested parents who have expressed dissatisfaction with their current school -- either the level

The Sacramento Country Day School is in a better position than most to transition to distance learning, Allshouse said.

"Our 1-to-1 device program provides middle and high school students with their own computers, while younger students have access to iPads, and we have made additional investments in technology resources to facilitate a seamless switch to remote learning if dictated by conditions," Allshouse said in an email.

Lainie Josephson, a co-president of the Sacramento Country Day School Parents Association, said that she was impressed with how the school pivoted to distance learning.

"They sort of didn't miss a beat," Josephson said.

Even for private schools that haven't seen an increase in interested students, their ability to provide streamlined distance learning has opened up new opportunities.

Lula Abusalih, the principal at Al-Arqam Islamic Preparatory School, said that interest for new applicants has remained the same as previous years. But for some new and existing families, Abusalih said, the ability to live-stream lessons means that they can enroll in the school from locations that are farther away.

PLANS FOR REOPENING

According to Snyder, some parents said they thought that Catholic schools will be able to bring students back for

"Waivers will only be considered by the County after cases begin trending down," Sacramento County representative Brenda Bongiorno said in an email.

Gonsalves said that Brookfield will make their decisions about re-opening based on public health recommendations, just like other schools in the area.

School at Brookfield will start online due to the health directive, Gonsalves said in an email. Then, when it is safe to do so, Brookfield will phase in an in-person learning plan which includes adhering to the 6-foot of distance rule, wearing masks when around others, and students having their temperatures taken before they enter the building.

Sacramento Country Day is currently planning for a remote start, said Allshouse, but if Sacramento County comes off of the watchlist by August 16 they will start in person.

For in-person school, Country Day will follow all health and safety regulations that other schools will follow, including breaking students into smaller groups, practicing physical distancing, implementing face coverings, and conducting enhanced cleaning of the campus.

"We're doing pretty much what everyone's doing," Allshouse said.

Mara Hoplamazian:
916-321-1232, @mara_hop