

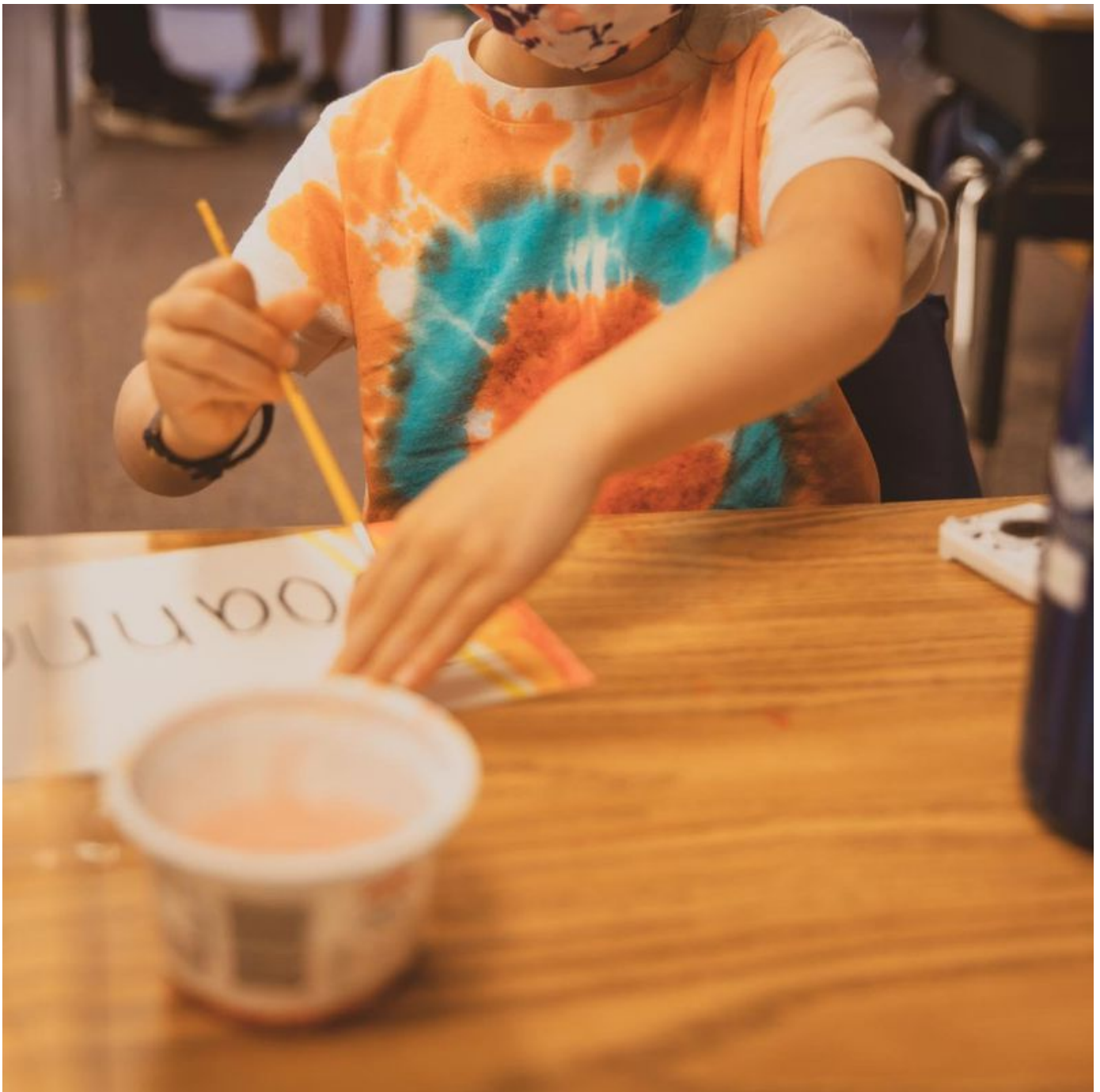
CORONAVIRUS IN ILLINOIS UPDATES

FEEDBACK

Some north suburban private schools with in-person classes see enrollment bump as parents ‘figure out the best option for their children’

By KAITLIN EDQUIST and KAREN ANN CULLOTTA
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A student paints her name at Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago in Northbrook during the school's first week of classes. The school reopened with in-person learning on Aug. 19, 2020. (Maya Ohcana / Solomon Schechter / HANDOUT)

As school administrators began releasing details over the summer about their respective fall plans, parents everywhere were met with a decision: follow the school's plan or un-enroll and pursue another option.

In some cases, parents have shifted their focus to private education. As a result, some north suburban private schools have increased their enrollment for the 2020-21 year. Others have held steady student populations, and some have even seen an enrollment drop partially because their plan couldn't cater to both in-person and virtual models, officials said.

While many area public schools shifted to fully or partially remote lessons, many private schools have maintained fully in-person classroom options.

“We’re in a really interesting moment of people thinking about value proposition,” said Lena Kushnir, head of at Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago.

The Northbrook Jewish day school is operating mostly in person with a virtual option to livestream classes via Zoom. They kicked off the year Aug. 19 and Aug. 20 with half capacity to ease into the new COVID-19 procedures and guidelines, Kushnir said.

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All students, both in-person and virtual, started Aug. 21. Solomon Schechter enrolled 77 additional students for the new year, 28 of whom had just enrolled in August, bringing the school’s population to just over 400 students, according to officials.

Extra sections were added in kindergarten, second grade and sixth grade to make room for the new students while still maintaining social distancing needs, officials said.

Kushnir said the enrollment bump was most likely led by two key factors: positive reactions to the school’s coronavirus response in the spring and the fact that the school would be offering in-person instruction in the fall. She said they’d received more than 40 applications just in late July and early August after revealing their fall plan.

“I think (positive buzz) already existed and kind of put us on people’s radar in a way we perhaps wouldn’t have been before,” she said. “And I do think there’s a driver of knowing that our plan was to be in person. There are families who maybe thought about Schechter before and just decided not to, and this was kind of that extra bump that got them over the hump.”

A teacher peers over a plastic divider at a student at Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago in Northbrook during the school's first week of classes. The school reopened with in-person learning on Aug. 19, 2020. (Maya Ohcana / Solomon Schechter / HANDOUT)

One of the parents who enrolled in the final hour was Kyle Stone of Deerfield. Stone said he was familiar with Schechter but that it wasn't really on his radar as an option for his son until the final days of July.

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Stone's son was expected to begin kindergarten in Deerfield Public Schools District 109 this fall. But after the district revealed its plan to start the year virtually, he and his wife decided to look elsewhere. They sent in an application for their son a few days later after watching a webinar about Schechter's fall plans.

Stone and his wife both work in-person jobs, which played a role in their decision, he said. Their experience with e-learning in the spring did, too. Stone said he was worried about his son being isolated and having trouble paying attention through a screen for another year.

“What we found with remote learning last year was that what previously had been a zeal and a zest and a demonstrative joy of learning had been squashed and deflated,” he said. “Our worry with starting the year remote is that we’d have that deflation continue and set the tone for elementary school.”

Stone said he was attracted not only to Schechter’s in-person plan, but also to the safety precautions they’ve put in place and the way they’ve put families at ease such a tumultuous time.

“We have confidence in Schechter’s ability to be nimble because the school is smaller and it’s easier for them to make changes and adjustment as the need arises,” he said.

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Tuition at Schechter runs around \$25,000 to \$26,000 depending on grade, with financial aid options available, according to officials. Kushnir said she thinks people might be willing to pay that price right now because they’re thinking differently about what they want out of their child’s education experience.

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That was the case for Stone, he said. As a product of public schools himself, Stone said paying tuition for elementary school was a foreign concept to him. But he said he and his wife ultimately chose to make the switch because of the confidence they have in the school’s abilities, pandemic or not.

“It’s not without recognizing that this is not free public education,” Stone said. “It’s an unexpected bridge to have to cross, but we’re glad to do it.”

At Roycemore School in Evanston, officials will be welcoming 217 students in pre-K through 12th grade for the start of the new school year, Head of School Adrienne Finley Odell said.

The enrollment number has held steady from last year, but Finley Odell said officials at the private school have seen a surge of last minute applications in recent weeks. According to the school website, yearly tuition starts around \$17,400 for full-day kindergarten and is \$28,800 for high school.

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"We've seen a lot of interest, and a lot of it is coming later than normal, so we're expecting to see our enrollment pop up even more," Finley Odell said.

A health and safety task force, which includes a local hospital executive and a pulmonary critical care physician among its members, has been busy since last spring designing a safe reopening plan, which ensures social distancing and other COVID-19 protocol. While about 75% of parents have opted for in-person learning for their children, the school is offering remote instruction to 25% of families who feel more comfortable with that option, she said.

"I feel badly for schools that are so large, because our model has always been a small school setting, and so we're able to do things that would be impossible with a larger enrollment," Finley Odell said.

In addition to creating student cohorts, school officials will be using a block schedule for older students to ensure a seamless transition if the campus needs to move in and out of remote learning, she said.

The school will also be using a special health and safety app designed by Roycemore senior Ephraim Zimmerman, 17, of Chicago, as well as taking advantage of the school's Evanston campus for outdoor learning whenever possible when the weather allows.

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"This is a moment in time when we weren't sure what we'd see with enrollment, so we're just delighted to be able to hold steady," Finley Odell said.

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Students show their social distance at Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago in Northbrook during the school's first week of classes. The school reopened with in-person learning on Aug. 19, 2020. (Maya Ohcana / Solomon Schechter / HANDOUT)

Officials at North Shore Country Day School in Winnetka say they are also receiving inquiries from new families due to the increased demand for in-person instruction, given that many public schools are starting the new school year with remote learning.

"We certainly are hearing from parents who are evaluating their options, and seeing an uptick in phone calls from parents who are trying to figure out the best option for their children," said Jason Giffen, director of admission and financial aid at the private school.

Given the pandemic's impact on the economy, Giffen said officials are pleased that the school's enrollment has held steady at around 525 students in pre-K through 12th grade.

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The school has also created a special fund to help retain current families who might be having difficulty affording tuition. Regular tuition starts around \$21,000 for junior kindergarten and ranges up to around \$35,400 for high school, according to the school website.

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Still, officials are taking a pause on enrolling more students this fall, "until we launch this COVID plan, and do it well and thoughtfully," Giffen said.

The school, which expects to limit their class sizes to 15 students, also plans to offer extra-curricular activities, including performance arts, as well as athletic teams including golf, tennis and cross country.

Officials at two private Catholic high schools in Wilmette, Regina Dominican and Loyola Academy, said their enrollment numbers have also held steady since last spring.

Other private schools have seen a decrease in enrollment this year, however. Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Glenview has seen its student population drop by almost 100, though the number has continued to change in recent weeks, according to spokeswoman Sue Pelletier.

The school expected a decline pre-COVID, Pelletier said in an email, since a large eighth grade class graduated in the spring. But she said some pre-school and kindergarten families have also un-enrolled to pursue other options.

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As part of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the school is operating fully in-person. Pelletier said the decreased total enrollment, around 750 students as of Aug. 17, is still in line with general expectations and helps the school a bit in social distancing efforts as they return in person.

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In a video to families posted at the end of July, principal Amy Mills asked parents to let the school know if they wanted to attend in person or if they needed to un-enroll and move to a different school or homeschool setting based on a need for virtual learning.

"I'd love to say OLPH can do it all, that we can offer in person instruction for those families that would like that, as well as online instruction for those families that need that," she said. "Just can't do it. It's not realistic to ask and expect teachers to be able to stay in both platforms in a quality way for a significant period of time."

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