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## Education

### In changing market, private schools cut, freeze tuition

By Gillian Branstetter, March 23, 2018 at 3:00 AM



Middle-schooler Kira Greiner heads to class at Harrisburg Academy, which enrolls students in preschool through 12th grade. The Cumberland County school is freezing tuition for the 2018-2019 academic year. - (Photo / Submitted)

Two private schools in Central Pennsylvania are enacting new tuition policies in moves each hopes will attract families from a broader range of income levels.

**Mercersburg Academy** in Franklin County is cutting tuition for day students at the elite boarding school by 10 percent, and lowering the annual increase for tuition for boarding students from more than 3 percent to 1.5 percent. Both changes will take effect in the 2018-19 academic year.

Annual tuition at the academy, which sits on a 300-acre campus in the borough of Mercersburg, currently runs \$39,250 for day students and \$58,325 for boarding students, making the school among the most expensive private schools in the commonwealth. In the 2016-17 academic year, Mercersburg Academy saw \$33.8 million in revenue, \$18.3 million of which came from net tuition, according to data provided by the school.

According to Katie Titus, head of school for Mercersburg Academy, the changes in tuition will hopefully make the school more accessible for families in the middle of the income spectrum, a range she said the school is working to define.

"Right now, for middle-class families, a school like ours feels very much out of reach. Even if you're being given an award of financial aid," said Titus.

Currently, 49 percent of Mercersburg students are awarded some level of financial aid, with 30 percent of students receiving aid based on the financial needs of their families. The school also rewards financial aid to students based on

merit.

But according to Titus, the very nature of needs-based financial aid means Mercersburg and private schools in general see a haves and have-nots phenomenon — where the student body is made up largely of low-income children who benefit from aid and high-income children whose families can afford the school with less aid or no aid at all.

“When our kids leave here and they go out into the world, they’re not going to live in a world of complete haves and have-nots. So we’re deliberately trying to create an environment where we have all sorts of diversity — socioeconomic diversity is just one element of that,” said Titus.

Of the 435 students at Mercersburg, 20 percent are people of color and 22.6 percent are from a country other than the United States. The school counts among its alumni seven Rhodes Scholars, one Nobel laureate and two Academy Award winners: Jimmy Stewart and Benicio Del Toro.

The school is far from the only private school seeing rising tuition costs as a barrier to entry for many families, said Titus.



Sixth-graders Annabel Hathaway, left, and Drue Meals attend Harrisburg Academy in Cumberland County. - (Amy Spangler)

According to a report from **the National Association of Independent Schools**, the average tuition in a seven-day boarding school was \$56,650 in the 2017-18 academic year. The average tuition for a five-day day school was \$25,038.

The NAIS average for a boarding school in 2016-17 was \$55,255, meaning the average tuition climbed 2.5 percent. At Mercersburg, tuition climbed 3.25 percent.

“As an industry, there’s a lot of conversation about tuition and how we’re shrinking, essentially, our own market by growing our tuition at the rate we’re growing it,” said Titus.

While tuition at **Harrisburg Academy** falls below the national average, the East Pennsboro day school is making changes similar to those underway at Mercersburg and for many of the same reasons.

The 330-student academy is freezing tuition rates for its K-12 programming for the 2018-19 academic year. While tuition rates have typically risen between 2 and 4 percent each year, the school is locking annual tuition for its day students at \$17,700 for the elementary school, \$19,300 for the middle school and \$20,400 for the high school.

According to Kristina Pae, director of communications for the school, the decision to freeze tuition came as parents raised concerns about the cost.

“We really just felt like it was important to make this education accessible. As we continue to experience tuition increases, so many families were saying to us it was at the height of what they were able to afford,” said Pae.

Harrisburg Academy is also making changes to its early childcare programming, expanding services from the academic year to a full year and offering longer hours to better serve working parents. The academy is also ending its practice of charging additional fees for early drop-offs and late pick-ups.

“We found that with our early program, because it was structured more like a school, we found that it was somewhat of a barrier to dual-working families looking for childcare in the hours outside of the school day,” said Pae.

Tuition for a full year of early childhood programming at the academy is \$15,000, while the academic year — spanning from August through June — is \$14,000.

The school is making these changes as it wraps up its accreditation process with **the Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools**, a statewide nonprofit accreditation service.

According to Pae, the process occurs once every 10 years and requires the school to submit an in-depth report including input from the community on the school’s performance. The school — both its teachers and administrative staff — are then observed before the association reissues its accreditation.

In a statement, the association’s executive director, Linda Phelps, said the recent changes at Harrisburg and Mercersburg are in the tradition of private schools that are “mindful of and sensitive to their market.”

“Balancing affordability and accessibility in a large diverse market is intentional,” said Phelps. “Harrisburg Academy and Mercersburg Academy are two examples of this commitment to making an independent education accessible to more students by adjusting or freezing tuition.”

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