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## EDUCATION

# Private schools enjoy boost

**Enrollment is up:** More area families opting for private schools this year

**In-person learning:** Many parents wanted children in class during pandemic

Melissa Frick [mfrick@mlive.com](mailto:mfrick@mlive.com)

Private school systems in the Grand Rapids area saw higher enrollment this year as parents sought a reliable and safe return to in-person learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, officials say.

Faith-based schools are closely tracking the growth. Some school leaders are already planning to add space and say there could be waiting pools for buildings if the enrollment trend continues.

### CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Catholic schools in the Diocese of Grand Rapids had a total of 6,491 students enrolled across 31 learning communities in the region as of late January, which is up 8.1% from last year's count day, said Sarah Toepfer, marketing communications coordinator for schools at the diocese.

Many new parents who enrolled their kids in the Catholic school system said the pandemic played a factor in their decision to come to a private school this year, Toepfer told The Grand Rapids Press on Feb. 4.

"We're getting questions like: how many days are you virtual or hybrid?" she said. "We have parents coming to us who want that full in-person option and that consistency."

"Beyond 2020, we have not closed down. We've had a session 180 days each year. So, having that consistency, I think parents are noticing that and appreciating that, on top of all the safety protocols, because we're following the health department's guidelines."

While the school system saw a decline in enrollment last year due to fewer parents enrolling their preschoolers and kindergartners over COVID-19 fears, this year's total enrollment surpassed last year and the 2019-2020 school year, and the diocese saw its highest kindergarten enrollment in 13 years, Toepfer said.

"We had a 20% decrease in preschool enrollment (in 2020), but then we rebounded with kindergarten and preschool this year," Toepfer said. "A lot of people held their preschoolers back when it was going to be virtual (in the 2020-21 SEE EDUCATION, A4

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC VACCINATIONS

# Workers fight back after being fired



Illustration by Andrea Levy, Advance Local

**Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan terminated 250 employees for not complying with its COVID vaccination rules.**

Lindsay Moore and Rose White [MLive.com](http://MLive.com)

Twenty-two years into her career, Alicia Kowalczyk saw Blue Cross Blue Shield as her last stop before retirement.

She loved her job, her coworkers and the stability she provided her family. But when the company's vaccine policy conflicted

with her beliefs, she had to choose which piece of her identity to sacrifice.

"I'm supposed to be a safety net for (my kids)," she said. "I have to choose between my livelihood and the insurance and all of that, or going through a medical procedure that I 100% don't agree with."

The federal vaccine mandate for businesses with 100 or more employees created rifts in the workplace before it could even be implemented. On Jan. 13, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the mandate for businesses but kept the mandate in place for health care.

While some Michigan business owners were relieved to not enforce the rule, other employers had already set the policy in motion.

Kowalczyk, who is of Native American descent, said she chose not to get the

COVID-19 vaccine because of her religious beliefs. She is among the 250 Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan employees who were terminated on Jan. 5 for not complying with the company's vaccination deadline.

Under the proposed federal mandate, the insurance company was considered a federal contractor and therefore did not offer a testing option. The company says 1,900 unvaccinated employees received a religious exemption or chose to get the vaccine after being informed of the policy in October.

Blue Cross Blue Shield would not specify how many employees sought an exemption.

A group of more than 170 terminated insurance workers who were denied a SEE PANDEMIC, A6

## OLYMPICS

### White's last ride

In Shaun White's farewell performance, Ayumu Hirano of Japan won an elusive Olympic gold in the halfpipe with a boundary-pushing final run. **B1**

## FROM THE EDITOR

### Look online for Super Bowl results

Due to early Sunday deadlines, results from tonight's Super Bowl between the L.A. Rams and Cincinnati Bengals will not be in Monday's publications. For updated coverage from SoFi Stadium, go online at [mlive.com/sports](http://mlive.com/sports) and see Tuesday's print edition.

Advice, C10 Business, A15 Classified/Jobs, B7 Nation, A16 Local, A2 Obituaries, C1 Sports, B1 Weather, A17 130th year. No. 154 © The Grand Rapids Press Feedback: Send your comments to [comments@mlive.com](mailto:comments@mlive.com)



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GRAND RAPIDS

# Private school system expanding campuses

Michael Kransz [mkransz@mlive.com](mailto:mkransz@mlive.com)

Amid a 27.5% increase in enrollment over the past year, a private Christian school system in Grand Rapids is expanding its primary and secondary campuses to accommodate growth and better serve its students.

NorthPointe Christian Schools is expanding and improving its pre-kindergarten/elementary campus at 540 Russwood St. NE with six additional classrooms and enhanced science and art offerings.

“At the elementary, the impetus is to better meet the needs of our current base,” said Todd Tolsma, head of schools at NorthPointe Christian Schools.

“We have no specialty rooms for music, art. We want to be able to do our STEAM program, which is STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) but with arts added to it, and so this will allow us to better meet the needs of our students and serve our families.”

The goal is to begin construction in the first week of April and have it completed in September, as close to the beginning of the new school year as possible, Tolsma said.

At the middle/high school campus, 3101 Leonard St. NE, plans call for seven new classrooms to accommodate enrollment growth, a new band and orchestra room and improvements to science rooms with new equipment. The construction will also see a second story shell built for future expansion.

The additions will allow expanding class offerings in dual and concurrent enrollment, where students can earn college credits on campus, as well as the program where a student participates in an internship two days a week. Additionally, expanded pre-K through 12th grade opportunities in Spanish immersion courses will be offered.

“Part of it is to serve our existing constituency better, but also it allows us to grow at that level (of new enrollment),” Tolsma said.

Construction plans for the expansion are being finalized, but Tolsma said the goal is to break ground this summer and have buildings ready before the 2023-24 school year begins.

Other improvements include resurfac-

ing the eight tennis courts at the middle/high school and turning the soccer field into a dual-purpose field that would be used by the school’s football team as well. Bleachers accommodating about 800 people would be added.

The expansion and improvement capital campaign, called Forward in Faith, started around 2018. Since then, parents, faculty, alumni and even students have raised just under \$7 million to make the project possible.

That includes a \$2 million donation from a person who doesn’t wish to be named at this time, Tolsma said.

The expansion comes at a time of sizable growth in enrollment. This time last year, Tolsma said the district had about 820 students enrolled, pre-K through 12th grade. As of the last week of January, the district had 1,046 students — an increase of about 27.5%.

Tolsma attributed the growth to the values the district instills in its young learners. In his 14th year as head of schools, he said he doesn’t recall a larger year-over-year increase in student enrollment.

“To my knowledge, as far as percentages, this has been the largest percentage of growth (in enrollment),” he said. “And I really believe it’s a value system, the values that families are looking for for their kids. If they’re going to entrust them to somebody for eight hours a day, they want to make sure they’re aligned with their values and belief system.”

NorthPointe Christian Schools is an independent, nondenominational Christian school that has students from more than 150 churches in the area across 27 denominations.

“The unifying factor for us is to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” Tolsma said. “Our goal and mission is to equip students to impact their world for Christ by providing a quality, Christ-centered education.”

The district did lose about 100 students in enrollment in the first year of the pandemic, Tolsma said. Pre-pandemic, enrollment was hovering around 920 to 940 students. The enrollment increase from pre-pandemic to now is about 12.5%.

EDUCATION

# Private schools enjoy boost

Continues from A1

school year) so, now that we’re in person, I think that has definitely aided those numbers.”

Enrollment in the Catholic school system is up 1.6% from before the pandemic, Toepfer said. The system enrolled 6,342 students in the 2019-2020 school year, according to 2019 fall count day data.

To support families amid the pandemic, beginning in the 2021-22 school year, families new to Catholic schools in the diocese did have access to Welcome Scholarships for their preschool and kindergarten students worth up to \$750 toward tuition.

**GRAND RAPIDS CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**

Grand Rapids Christian Schools also saw an increase in enrollment compared to the past two years, said Superintendent Tom DeJonge.

The preschool through 12th grade school system, which has five campuses throughout Grand Rapids and Rockford, enrolled 2,253 students this fall, up from 2,112 students in fall 2020, and 2,214 students in fall 2019.

Grand Rapids Christian Schools had 198 first-time students this year, which refers to new students in grades one through 12 and doesn’t include new preschoolers and kindergartners, DeJonge said. That number is up this year by an average of roughly 40 students compared to the past four years.

“That’s a pretty hefty increase,” he said. “I would think that that’s a result in part due to our response to COVID in what we did, as it pertains to creating a safe and welcoming environment for kids.”

The school system is projecting a comparable number of first-time students next year, as well, DeJonge said.

Grand Rapids Christian saw a decline in preschool and kindergarten student enrollment last year because of COVID-19 fears, DeJonge said. But that number rebounded this year, with the district enrolling its largest preschool class in over a decade, the superintendent said.

There were 297 preschool students and 155 kindergarten students this year, DeJonge said.

Grand Rapids Christian is preparing for further expansion to allow for more growth in preschool enrollment, and renovations are soon to begin for additional



Grand Rapids-area private schools saw an increase in student enrollment this year. *MLive.com files*

preschool space, DeJonge said.

**NORTHPOINTE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**

NorthPointe Christian Schools is expanding its primary and secondary campuses because of growing enrollment.

This time last year, Head of Schools Todd Tolsma recently said the school system had about 820 students enrolled, pre-K through 12th grade. As of the end of January, NorthPointe had 1,046 students — an enrollment growth of about 27.5%.

Ada Christian School, a PreK-8 school with around 670 students enrolled this year, also saw an enrollment increase of about 12% this year, principal Kevin Sall told *MLive* in an email.

DeJonge said it’s too early to say whether the rise in enrollment will continue for private schools after the pandemic.

“I will say that if things continue like they are, we are going to be — and already are, to some extent — but we are going to be in a position of having to carefully identify open seats per classroom or per grade level at each building, and very likely have a wait pool because of space restrictions,” he said.

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