

Kraybill Mennonite merging

To become part of Lancaster Mennonite

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Kraybill Mennonite School, which teaches students in kindergarten through eighth grade, once was an offshoot of Lancaster Mennonite, but it split off 30 years ago.

Now it is returning in a merger that takes effect July 1. Seeking a stronger identity with the church and an easier transition for students from middle school to Lancaster Mennonite High School, Kraybill administrators decided it was time to reconnect with a larger academic system.

“In terms of operation, the advantages of being part of a K-12 system will add a depth and resource to Kraybill that we haven’t had before.” John Weber, Kraybill’s head administrator, said. “It will probably mean some administrative streamlining, particularly in terms of marketing and curriculum.”

Kraybill will retain its name, its head administrator and school facilities but will be governed by Lancaster Mennonite School Board and funded within the larger school’s budget.

Local families and donors grappled with the pros and cons of such a merger for three years before allowing the Kraybill board to initiate dialogue with Lancaster Mennonite School Board in November 2004.

Both schools, Kraybill’s pastoral committee and its parent-teacher fellowship have approved the merger, which will add Kraybill’s 350 students next fall to Lancaster Mennonite’s 1,318 pupils at its three other campuses.

Many students at Kraybill, at 598 Kraybill Church Road, opt to attend Lancaster Mennonite High School on Lincoln Highway East after they graduate from eighth grade.

The merger will allow faculty from both schools to work together on a joint curriculum and enhance professional development opportunities for teachers, Weber said.

This is the third recent Mennonite school merger. New Danville Mennonite and Locust Grove Mennonite schools joined the Lancaster Mennonite system in 2002 and 2003, respectively.

There are seven other local schools affiliated with Mennonite Church USA, the conference that includes Lancaster and Kraybill Mennonite. Richard Thomas, superintendent of Lancaster Mennonite, said he doesn't foresee a day when all the schools would be under one umbrella.

"There are some local dynamics that come into play," Thomas said. "I think the schools that would merge would need to have a common mission. Some have different levels of connection to the church."

Thomas said about 55 percent of Lancaster Mennonite's students are not affiliated with a Mennonite church. They are attracted to the school because of its unique commitment to religion and education, he said.

"It is the linkage between being centered in Christ and academic excellence that transforms our students into positive agents of change in the world," Thomas said. Thomas and Weber said the merger should not affect tuition, and the four schools will continue to hold individual fundraisers.

Every spring, Kraybill hosts a benefit auction that includes a Friday night pig roast. In the fall, students participate in 'Race for Education' and collect pledges for an October run.

These annual traditions are rooted within Kraybill Mennonite's families, and Weber said one of the stipulations of the merger was maintaining these customs.

"It's not like that history can be ignored," Weber said. "The local flavor has to be nurtured."

Kraybill Mennonite was established in 1949 as Lancaster Mennonite's western campus. But in the early 1970s, Kraybill Mennonite became an independent entity when its plans to build a high school fell through and the parents committee took over the school.

Thomas said he doesn't want Lancaster Mennonite's four campuses to be 'cookie cutters that are exactly the same' and is excited to work with Kraybill administrators in the coming months.

"I think this is best for the students," he said. "My energy comes from trying to provide the best Christian education and move Mennonite education to a new level."

"Yeah, I'm excited about that."