

Private school pull

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GILROY - On this rain-soaked Friday morning, the last day before Christmas vacation, Nicole Dennison and Lauren Curd would much rather be Gilroy High School students.

Instead, they are two of the dozen or so private schoolers who waited in the cold dawn today outside St. Mary's Parish for a bus that will spend the next hour driving students to Notre Dame and Palma high schools in Salinas.

"That's what bugs. It'd be a lot easier to go to school in Gilroy," said Dennison, a 14-year-old Notre Dame freshman.

"I'm not much of a morning person. I've missed the bus a lot," admits Curd, 15, a San Martin resident who is also a freshman at the all-girls school.

Just in the last two months, parent frustration over issues concerning how the Gilroy Unified School District serves its highest-achieving students has rekindled talk of an exodus of families from the local public school system.

There are at least 160 private schools in the Bay Area. Polling just 10 of them reveals that roughly 900 students from Gilroy are now attending those institutions. Given the state's current budget crisis and its per student payout of nearly \$4,700, 900 students represents a significant financial impact.

Both Dennison and Curd say it was their parents' decision to send them out of town for school. And while both girls would prefer to attend a co-ed public high school, they acknowledge they are receiving a good education at Notre Dame.

"I'm not going to go to a private college, that's for sure," Dennison said. "I've been in private schools for a long time, and I really wanted to go to Gilroy High School."

Having their children go to school in Gilroy would be a lot easier for Tom Bundros and Dianne Habing, too, who like many "garlic town" parents decided they'd rather invest upwards of \$10,000 a year in their children's education rather than send them to public school for free.

What isn't difficult for Habing is explaining why she sends her freshman son, Jason, to Palma High. It takes her all of two words: "honors classes."

GHS currently offers English and social studies honors courses to freshmen, and has pledged to extend those classes to freshmen and sophomores next year. However, many parents want the program expanded to include more subjects across all grade levels, and they want to see the program's "pilot" status removed.

"Getting into college is a huge factor. I feel Jason has a better opportunity for getting into his college of choice if he goes to private school right now," Habing said.

"I wouldn't be against him going to Gilroy High for his junior and senior years," when students wanting more academic rigor have roughly 20 Advanced Placement courses to choose from, Habing said. "That decision we'd probably leave up to him."

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As for Bundros, who was elected Nov. 5 to the Gilroy School Board on a campaign platform based on reform, "nothing would make her come back," he says of his youngest daughter Angeliki, who is a freshman at Presentation High School, a Catholic all-girls school in San Jose.

"I see it in my daughter's eyes that we made the right decision," said Bundros, who put his five other children through GUSD schools. "I don't have a free \$10,000 each year, so as a result I expect my daughter to take it seriously."

Bundros' desire to run for a seat on the school board mirrors his reason for sending Angeliki to private school. Over his years of involvement with the school district, Bundros, an IBM software engineer, says he has been increasingly disappointed with the lack of academic rigor and disciplinary control inside Gilroy's public schools.

Bundros, who thanks to a top-notch music program saw some of his children thrive in GUSD schools, had one child who called life at Gilroy High a form of "child abuse," he said.

"As adults we forget we have a fair amount of freedom, but consider what it's like to feel like you're chained to a chair five days a week, either bored or in chaos," Bundros said.

Fellow School Trustee Bob Kraemer is not worried about the numbers of students abandoning the GUSD ship. In fact, this year saw an overall increase in enrollment by roughly 100 students.

Instead, Kraemer concerns himself with the reasons families choose private schools over public.

"There are good reasons for leaving, and there are bad reasons for leaving, as far as a district's perspective is concerned," Kraemer said.

For Kraemer, a good reason - one that doesn't speak poorly of the GUSD - would involve a family who wants, for instance, a smaller atmosphere or a religious-based education.

"That's why we live in the United States. We have a free choice," Kraemer said.

Bad reasons - ones that speak poorly of the GUSD - would be if students are leaving because they are academically bored or feel unsafe, Kraemer said.

Interviews with several parents, some of whom declined to comment on the record for this story, indicate that both "good" and "bad" reasons are causing parents to leave the GUSD.

"I don't know how many people left because of the bad reasons, but it really doesn't matter. The solution is the same for 10 students as it is for 400," Kraemer said. "We need to keep challenging our high-achieving students more than we do."

The value of investing in private education, however, is somewhat less clear for anyone interested in attending the University of California at Berkeley. Spokesperson for the university Janet Gilmore says admission into Berkeley is not easier for private school students "by virtue of the high school they attend."

Instead, says Gilmore, admissions officers look at the opportunities a student had available to them and how many of those opportunities they took.

"If a student had lots of AP courses they could have taken but didn't, that would impact our evaluation of them," Gilmore said. "It's all based on the context of what is available."