

## Private schools seek key to diversity

**NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES, Staff Writer**

Using tactics some consider unconventional, even radical, Durham Academy has become a leader in the recruitment of black, Latino and Asian students in a state where independent schools remain overwhelmingly white.

One out of five students at the elite college prep school is black, Latino or Asian, compared with one in 10 in independent schools across North Carolina. Among its peers in the Southeast, it ranks in the top five in diversity.

The school is motivated by a belief that in a global society, diverse classrooms are as important to an elite education as honors courses and top-tier teachers. So it gives the same special admissions consideration to students from diverse racial, cultural and religious backgrounds as it does to siblings and children of alumni and staff members. And, perhaps most controversial, Durham Academy created support groups exclusively for black, Latino and Asian students.

Decades after public school desegregation led many whites to enroll their children in private schools, Southern private schools remain less racially diverse than in any other region of the country.

But private schools in the Triangle say they are trying to leave behind their homogeneous pasts.

"[Independent schools] are strategically planning where they haven't before," said Gene Batiste, vice president of equity and justice for the National Association of Independent Schools. "Before, if they did everything else and there was time and money left, that would be for diversity."

Doreen Kelly, head of Ravenscroft School in North Raleigh, said her school has had a "long commitment" to diversity "in the broadest sense of the word." The school has played host to a diversity conference and sent teachers to a national "People of Color" conference held by the independent school association.

Ravenscroft enrolled 1,078 students in grades K-12 in 2004, 91 percent white. The school would not say how many Latino, black and Asian students are enrolled.

Kelly said she expects a specific goal for diversity to come out of the school's developing strategic plan. But she said Ravenscroft has not put into print a special consideration for recruiting students by race or income.

Other private schools say race is not a priority in recruiting.

"We are not looking at a family and saying, 'Here's a family of a different race, let's attract them,' " said Mike Woods, administrator of Wake Christian Academy in Raleigh.

Woods said his school looks strictly for students who are committed to Jesus Christ and has no plans to make any special consideration for nonwhite students. The school is 93 percent white.

### **'Radical' but ...**

Durham Academy says its success has meant going beyond conventional recruiting of black, Latino and Asian students. Jessica Carothers, the academy's director of admissions, said that the school knew putting racial diversity on par with other special admissions criteria was "radical" but that such methods were necessary if the school meant what it said about becoming more diverse.

Michael Ulku-Steiner, Durham Academy's upper school director, said its policy to recruit different types of students is more powerful than spoken intentions.

"Every school talks diversity, but our school has been able to put real work to it," Ulku-Steiner said. "Everything we do, we have tried to look through this lens of diversity."

The 1,129-student school has boosted its need-based scholarships, handing out \$1 million this year. In 2003, it founded the Triangle Diversity Alliance with several area schools, including Carolina Friends School in Durham, Ravenscroft and Cary Academy. The alliance brings together Latino, Asian and black students from the member schools for conferences and social gatherings.

It is the creation of groups that cater exclusively to black, Latino and Asian students that seems to evoke the strongest reaction from other schools. The students discuss their problems and concerns with classmates who might be coping with similar issues. There are also such affinity groups for parents of those students.

Ravenscroft has no such groups, Kelly said: "We say we don't discriminate on the basis of race. We build meaningful relationships with kids regardless of color."

Carothers, Durham Academy's admissions director, said schools must acknowledge that it can be difficult for students of color -- no matter how academically stellar -- to adjust to predominantly white institutions.

"In some ways, the entire school is an affinity group for the white child," Carothers said. "We're trying to provide safe spaces for all children."

Jessica Couch, a senior at Durham Academy, said the affinity groups and the Triangle alliance have allowed her to find happiness at the school. She was angry when her parents told her last year that they were transferring out of her public high school.

"I felt like we were integrating the school," she said. "You get asked so many questions you shouldn't get asked, like, 'Are you from the ghetto?' 'How do you do your hair?' "

Being able to vent with students who share that experience eased her through a rough first year.

### **The alumni issue**

Many schools are scared to push diversity too much for fear of alienating alumni, who are big supporters and recruiters, said Batiste, of the National Association of Independent Schools.

While Durham Academy is an elite school -- covering 75 acres and selling education at up to \$16,000 per year -- it has long had a progressive group at its core.

A stone's throw from Research Triangle Park and nestled among major universities, Durham Academy attracts white parents who know the value of working alongside people of different races, cultures and economic backgrounds, Ulku-Steiner said.

From the board of directors to the parents, the school family has bought into the importance of diverse classrooms, he said. It helps that nearly half of the county's residents are black, Latino or Asian, giving the school a larger pool to draw from.

Durham Academy leaders say they aren't finished yet. They would like the school to mirror its community. The school still battles a perception that it is a sanctuary for whites, and some students still don't feel completely welcome.

"Some people imagine diversity is like a Benetton ad; everyone sits around singing 'Kumbaya,' " Ulku-Steiner said. "It takes years and years."

**Staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones can be reached at 956-2433 or [nikole.hannahjones@newsobserver.com](mailto:nikole.hannahjones@newsobserver.com).**

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