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Districts seek relief from cyber charter school costs

Legislation to address tuition reform

BY SARAH HOFIUS HALL
STAFF WRITER

As cyber charter school enrollment grew over the last decade, Carbondale Area School District's budget reserves disappeared.

Now operating with a \$2.5 million deficit, the district started its own cyber pro-

gram last year, joining a growing number of districts trying to find relief.

The 37 school districts in Northeast Pennsylvania pay a combined \$42 million in cyber charter school tuition each year. The total amount paid — and the way the state determines tuition — has

many people calling for reform.

Cyber charter schools are privately operated, publicly funded schools authorized by the state and paid for by school districts. Advocates say cyber schools provide options for families seeking choice for their children's

educations. Children learn virtually on charter school-provided computers, at no cost to the families.

The cost comes to the districts instead.

Bills in the state House and Senate would allow districts with their own cyber programs to stop paying tuition to cyber charter

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JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Cyber school teacher Ken Murphy talks with former cyber students Katie Fontini, right, and Kassandra Matthews at West Scranton High School.

'I'm happy for her. I just hope that she succeeds. The way this world is now, it's dangerous to be a police officer.'

Sgt. David Dunn

Scranton police officer, talking about his daughter joining the force

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LEAP OF FAITH

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Ugandan nun
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Sister Draru Mary Cecilia, of the congregation Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu in Northern Uganda, is executive director of the African Sisters Education Collaborative, which operates out of Marywood University.



JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

COVER STORY

Northeast WOMAN

A tribute to the region's best and brightest women

Leap of faith

Service brings Ugandan nun to Scranton

BY CAITLIN HEANEY WEST

STAFF WRITER

Sister Draru Mary Cecilia's draw to religious life began as a child in Uganda. It survived a war that forced her and her family to flee their home as bullets flew, and it drove her to continue her education even as her countrymen looked down on girls' schooling.

Now, it powers the work she does as executive director of the African Sisters Education Collaborative, which operates out of Emmanuel Hall at Marywood University in Scranton. The organization — which was founded in 1999 by leaders of four female religious in Pennsylvania and their associated colleges and universities — supports the education of religious sisters in Africa so they can better serve their communities.

"The church in Africa is still growing ... so this was one way to support (it)," Draru said.

On a recent morning in her cozy office at Marywood, Draru reflected on her past and how it brought her to this new country three decades after taking her first vows. She shared her parents' love story — Jacob and Julia came from different areas but met at a missionary site after her mother ran away from a betrothal as a young teen; they converted to Catholicism and married — and how they raised about 25 children, including eight biological ones, in a diverse area, one filled with Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and non-Christians alike.

"(My parents) were very devout Catholics. ... They prayed with us," Draru said. "They blessed us every morning, every evening."

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Draru “grew up an adventurous child,” she recalled, sharing how her journey to go live at her grandmother’s house for a couple years involved traveling on her own by boat, led only by her father’s directions.

“I didn’t want to be in one place for too long,” she said.

Draru was about 8 when the idea of joining religious life took hold. She had seen that the religious sisters had consecrated themselves to God, and joining the congregation, for her, “was always an idea of what could I do best for God.” Her parents raised her to value education, too, and her father — a teacher — encouraged Draru to continue her studies — despite how advanced education for girls was looked down upon — if she wanted to join a religious group, since the sisters there were all well-educated.

War interrupted her education, however, and separated her family at age 12, when they fled into exile.

“We all ran, and we only converged 25 kilometers (about 16 miles) away,” Draru said, recalling how she then found their smaller children and “held them like a chicken holding chicks.”

Despite the upheaval, Draru passed a school exam after completing only five of the traditional seven years of primary school. At 14, she walked about 52 miles to catch a bus to reach a relative’s house, where she could live and continue her secondary education.

When the time came to go to a convent, Draru sought out one far from home, driven again by that adventurous spirit to seek out a new place. Draru took her first vows with the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu in 1989.

Finishing high school in 1992, Draru hoped to become a primary teacher — she

loved the job and remembers even “teaching” her family goats as a child — and eventually earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the early 2000s. And in September 2017, she received her doctorate from Radboud University in the Netherlands.

In between all of her own learning, Draru continued to teach and serve others, moving for a time to Milan, Italy, where she brought together local youths. Her time there also involved helping African women who were the victims of human trafficking, forced into prostitution in Europe. Twenty-seven at the time, about the same age as those victims, Draru called her presence beside those women a contradiction, but one that helped to break down stereotypes about the women.

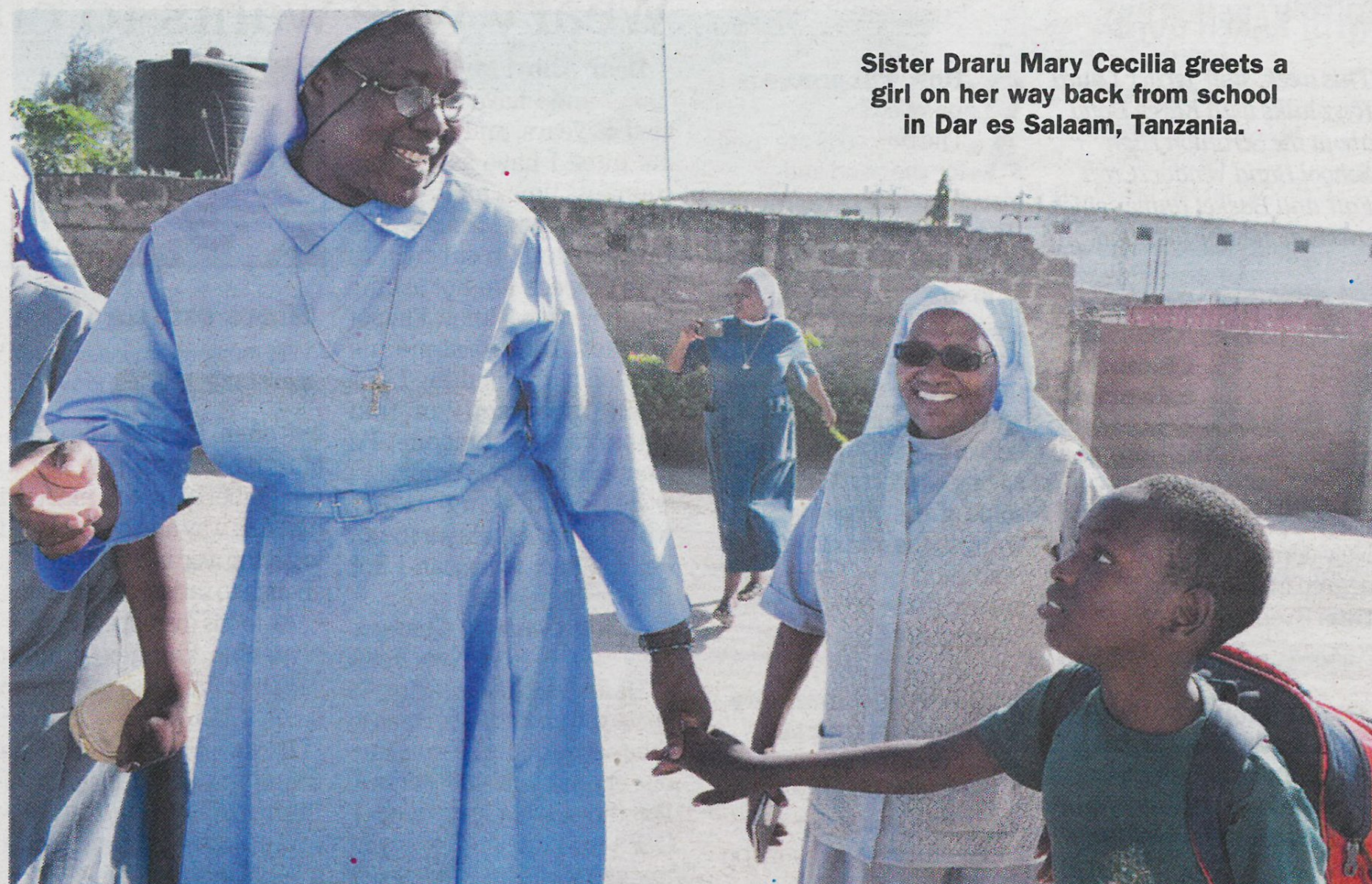
“By the time I was leaving, people understood (the victims),” she said.

Draru then returned to Africa and teaching, and she took a position as dean of students at Uganda Martyrs University. She loved the work and only applied for the ASEC job at the urging of her superior, who hoped to show ASEC that their organization had candidates. She assured Draru not to worry — she likely would not get the job anyway since people from all over the world would be applying.

But then came an interview — and a second, third and fourth. Then, a job offer.

Draru trembled at the thought of leaving the classroom, and she still had to defend her thesis and would need to give several months notice at her job. But ASEC was willing to wait, and Draru prayed about her predicament and sought counseling from her fellow sisters and professors.

Draru recalled how her mother had always said that, wherever there are human beings, you can find someone to connect with. She reflected on the months-long inter-



Sister Draru Mary Cecilia greets a girl on her way back from school in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Meet Sister Draru Mary Cecilia

At home: A native of Uganda, she now lives in Scranton.

At work: She is a member of the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu and executive director of the African Sisters Education Collaborative, Scranton.

Inspirations: Her parents, Julia and Jacob; elderly people; and children

Aspirations: To improve the educational opportunities for child mothers in Africa and break the cycle of child motherhood so girls get to be mothers when they are ready to be mothers

Diversions: Walking, enjoying nature, listening to classic music, reading and watching sports

Aversion: How people limit themselves in relating to others because of differences in their backgrounds (“Respect each person,” she said. “You might not buy their values ... but it’s not a reason to segregate that person.”)

Quote: “Bless the Lord all my soul.”

view process and how she did not want to let down not only ASEC but also “the African sisterhood.” ASEC needed someone who had international experience, not only in the Western world but also in Africa, she said, and they felt she had just that.

“It’s my time to give back to my sisters back home,” Draru said.

While she had never been

to the United States before she began her job in November 2017, she knew that as long as she’d be with other sisters, she’d be OK. She stayed with the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, when she moved to Scranton, which helped her settle into her new life. And working with ASEC “is really satisfying,” Draru said, adding, “I

am here — I am at this level — because somebody gave me a push, whether it was my parents or my aunt or my brothers.”

The organization offers “sister-to-sister support,” Draru said, providing more access to education and training for African sisters. They learn leadership skills such as grant writing and managing finances, too, in the belief that all these components will help the sisters continue their work in African communities, places Draru said the government cannot reach and others do not go. In places where sisters have withdrawn, Draru said, the services — which include educational, spiritual, health, environmental, economic and social work — have gone downhill.

“Higher-education programs help sisters gain credentials to sustain the services they offer,” she said, calling the sisters “the social face of the church.”

In addition to supporting

the sisters, ASEC brings students from its affiliated American universities to Africa for service-learning projects that translate into credits. ASEC programs have had a tremendous impact, Draru noted, pointing out how the sisters now can better organize their services and bring the love of Jesus Christ to the most vulnerable.

“For me, the big goal is about giving back to the communities back in Africa ... because that’s where (the) need is most,” she said.

The past year has been one of transition for Draru and her organization but also a positive experience that has taught her much. And there is so much to be thankful for in life, from the people she interacts with to the opportunities to provide services to others.

“I have that platform to do that,” Draru said, “and for that, I’m very grateful to God.”

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