

BRIGHTON

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Politicians pledge good-faith effort for Presentation

By Connie Paige, Globe Correspondent | January 23, 2005

Secretary of State William F. Galvin remembers when he was a boy walking mornings to Our Lady of the Presentation School with a group of neighborhood children, all in a regimented order dictated by school officials: older children in the lead watching out for the younger ones.

At the school, a station wagon would draw up at the entrance, and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur would pile out.

"It was difficult to believe you could pack that many nuns into a station wagon," Galvin recently recalled with a chuckle.

Galvin's reminiscences contrast sharply with a portrait of the Presentation school today.

Now, the students come from more diverse ethnic backgrounds. There are first-generation students from Algeria, Brazil, China, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Greece, Haiti, India, Iran, Ireland, the Philippines, Peru, Trinidad, and Ukraine. Many of the rules have been relaxed. Students still wear uniforms -- jumpers and knee socks for girls; shirts and ties for boys -- but if they do not get a ride from parents, they walk to school independently. The Oak Square school's principal, Sister Mary Duke, is the only nun on the staff.

Still, the 80-year-old school arouses the same strong loyalty it did more than 40 years ago, when Galvin and his four siblings attended it. And the move by the Archdiocese of Boston to close it down this spring has incited a maelstrom of emotion.

Galvin is among a group of politicians throwing their weight behind angry parents, whose proposal to save the school by buying it and running it themselves was rejected Jan. 11 by the Archdiocese of Boston. The archdiocese announced last Tuesday that the building would be used for the Metropolitan Tribunal of Boston, charged with the administration of church justice. (The tribunal had been housed on property since sold to Boston College.)

A day later, a spokeswoman said the archdiocese did not expect to reconsider its decision.

Galvin, who has been mentioned as a possible Democratic gubernatorial candidate, pledged last week to do anything the parents ask of him to try to reverse the decision, while state Senator Steven A. Tolman and state Representative Kevin G. Honan, who both represent the area, sent a letter to Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley requesting a meeting to urge him to reconsider. The Democratic lawmakers also said they would march alongside parents to the archdiocesan chancery, schedules permitting, in a protest planned for early next week.

In their letter, Tolman and Honan called the recent closings "a faith-shattering experience." The proposal, they said, was "a clear opportunity for the Archdiocese to reestablish a sense of good faith and good will with those who have suffered the loss of their church and, in many cases, so much more."

"It's disgraceful," said City Councilor Jerry P. McDermott, another graduate of the

school who also represents Allston-Brighton. "They're really going for the jugular of this community." McDermott joined other politicians at a candlelight vigil last week supporting the parents.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who sent a letter of support of the parents' proposal to O'Malley in late December, referred to that endorsement last week and has not taken a further public stand, according to his office.

The parents agree enrollment at the grades one-through-six school has been declining -- about 100 students still attend classes, down from a peak of 150 -- but attribute that to the announcement of the school's closure. And they vowed last week to preserve what they see as a cornerstone of their neighborhood.

"We will not go silently into the night," said Kevin Carragee, chairman of a foundation developed over the past eight months to help keep the school alive. "This is a good fight, and we'll fight it."

Parents were "stunned" by the announcement of the archdiocese's intended use of the building and said it indicated "bad faith," Carragee said.

Under the parents' business plan, which would involve purchasing or leasing the building and then renovating it, the \$3 million tab would be borne by income from programs they would offer. The parents said they'd be willing to pay fair market value for the school, assessed by the archdiocese at \$1.9 million in 2003.

The shuttering of the Presentation was among nine school closures announced for 2004, in light of annual archdiocesan operating deficits of \$10 million, according to archdiocesan officials.

The Brighton parents made their purchase offer after church officials announced last fall it would close, as part of a reconfiguration plan to sell off properties to pay outstanding debts. The parents asked for a delay, and now the school is scheduled to lock up for the last time this spring. The parish associated with it has already shut its doors.

The parents set up the foundation to run what they planned would be a private school with Catholic instruction. They were willing to have some kind of arrangement with the archdiocese, or, alternatively, invite in a separate religious order, according to Thomas O'Brien, one of the parents. O'Brien said he wrote a letter on behalf of the parents calling the school "an essential part of the fabric that holds our community together" and imploring O'Malley to reconsider.

Since last June, they have been honing a detailed proposal for the school's mission, governance, and finances.

The proposal describes the Oak Square neighborhood as very diverse, citing a recent influx of Asian and Latino immigrants.

The parents' vision was to team up with the Brighton branch of the Boston Public Library and the YMCA to offer full-year child care, after-school programs, summer school, elder activities, adult education, English-as-a-second-language classes, and other immigrant services.

Nancy DeRosa, mother of two children in the school, said the idea could be a model, "the first and most perfect example" of how the church could transform the reconfiguration process to help communities save parish schools.

Allston-Brighton has a poverty rate of 23 percent of the population compared with Boston's 19.5 percent, according to US Census data used in the proposal. Family households in the neighborhood account for 32.7 percent of all households, compared with the citywide average of 48.1 percent. And Allston-Brighton has a rate of owner-occupancy of buildings of 19.3 percent, compared with Boston's 30.7 percent.

Tolman, A Catholic himself, he said he believes church officials turned "a blind eye" to the needs of the community, and failed to recognize how the parents' proposal followed the church's own mission of ministering to the the needy, and immigrants.

"They [church officials] are just not getting it," he said.

DeRosa, who organized an auction that raised almost \$40,000 to help keep the school open this year, said the archdiocese still owns many acres of property in Allston-Brighton that could be utilized for church needs instead of this school. "For them to need this one building, I have a very hard time understanding that," she said. "I don't believe any school is safe. I don't think they're interested at all in the business of educating children."

Beatriz Stratter said the archdiocese's double-barreled closures have left her and her husband, Dino, both originally from Peru, disappointed and disheartened.

"We felt that way when they closed the church, and we're still trying to make decisions about where do we go to Mass," said Stratter, with one child in fourth grade and two in kindergarten. "Now we have to figure out where do we go to school."

They are not the only neighborhood residents worried about the future.

Rosie Hanlon, a local business advocate, said she fears loss of the school would cause parents to move away, hurting the neighborhood's economy.

"As goes the school, so goes the neighborhood," said Hanlon, executive director of the Brighton Main Streets program, which she said represents about 150 businesses in the area.

Meanwhile, as the children milled about in the public library on a recent rainy afternoon, they expressed sadness about the possibility their school would close.

"I really want this school to stay open," said 7-year-old Alannah O'Brien, who is in the second grade with her identical twin, Grace. "I really like all the teachers here, and it's a very nice school."

Connie Paige can be reached at cpaige@globe.com. ■