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GLOBE EDITORIAL

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An anchor for Brighton

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THE BEST example of local grass-roots organizing in many years culminated last week with the sale of a shuttered parochial school to a neighborhood group once shunned by the Archdiocese of Boston. The saga of the Presentation School in Brighton has redemption written all over it. Boston residents who fear the loss of stabilizing institutions in their neighborhoods should take hope.

This story didn't start out well. In June 2005, Cardinal Sean O'Malley locked out Presentation School elementary school students for fear that their parents would stage an on-site protest of his decision to close the school. The archdiocese was struggling to consolidate parishes. But the clumsy lock-out strategy had about as much finesse as a trash can rolling down a flight of stairs.

Reporters and camera crews homed in on prekindergarten students who weren't allowed inside even to retrieve their pet goldfish. Boston's wily Mayor Menino stepped in and offered Faneuil Hall as the site of graduation ceremonies for the bewildered elementary school students and their outraged parents. The reputation of an archdiocese already reeling from the clergy sex abuse scandal dipped even further.

The loss of a quality school is enough to spur many Boston families to move to the suburbs. It's an especially serious concern in Allston-Brighton, where the roughly 19 percent owner-occupancy rate compares unfavorably with the city at large. Absentee landlords buy up properties in the neighborhood to meet the demand for student housing from nearby colleges and universities. Low-income and immigrant families find it hard to compete for housing. And middle-class families start to feel like it's not worth the effort.

In Brighton's Oak Square, however, a core group of parents drew the line. They formed a nonprofit foundation and started raising funds to purchase the Presentation school for reuse as a preschool, adult education site, and literacy center for immigrants. Negotiations with the archdiocese over the sale were often tense and confusing. But the neighborhood group held its ground and refined its plans during more than two years of tireless activism. In a magnanimous act, and in recognition of both the physical and symbolic importance of the building to the neighborhood, Cardinal O'Malley reduced the sales price dramatically. A major gift of \$350,000 from the Brighton-based New Balance Foundation helped to close the deal.

Presentation's pains aren't over. Activists are mounting a \$3 million capital campaign to support the renovation of the building. Corporate and charitable foundations, especially those that specialize in meeting capital needs, would do well to explore both the history and significance of this exceptional effort to buttress an urban community. ■

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