

City fetes shut-out students Graduation is held at Faneuil Hall

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By Michael Levenson, Globe Correspondent | June 11, 2005

Twelve-year-old Sabrina Rubaud's graduation from the sixth grade found her boarding a bus escorted by a police motorcade, whizzing past the State House, shaking Mayor Thomas M. Menino's hand, and finally accepting a diploma on an ornate Faneuil Hall stage.

It was a more momentous day than it would have been if her school, Our Lady of the Presentation, had been open. Locked out of the building by the Archdiocese of Boston, students, parents, and politicians turned the graduation ceremony into a high-profile celebration -- and a protest of the church's actions.

Hosted by Menino, children went to the Colonial-era hall yesterday and received certificates and special awards for attendance, spelling, and science while parents applauded and snapped pictures alongside elected officials who included Secretary of State William F. Galvin, state Representative Michael Moran of Brighton, and Menino.

Outside the hall, there was strong language. Parents denounced the church. Children carried signs. Menino said he wanted the children on the stage to send a message to Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley. "This is a struggle and we're going to overcome that struggle," he said.

Inside, children cheered and laughed as they were called onto the stage to receive their certificates.

"The kids had a traumatic experience," Menino said. "What we're doing today is just showing those kids there are some people in our community who want to honor them for the great work they did. This is a tangible action. It has an effect on these children."

When Menino entered the hall, students and parents leapt to their feet and gave him a thunderous ovation. "Menino! Menino!" some cheered, as he waved his hand to quiet the crowd. Parents also applauded Galvin, who has donated \$53,935 to the school.

The day began in Oak Square at 8 a.m., when the children got on a bus and watched their brick school recede into the distance as they sped down Washington Street. Some clutched signs that said "Honk for OLP," which they held to the windows of the bus.

"The only good thing about this is the archdiocese gave us a better graduation," Rubaud said on the way, as police motorcycle engines growled around the bus. "Not too many kids go to Faneuil Hall and have a graduation ceremony."

The children, 125 all together, in grades one through six, cheered as they passed the State House. When they arrived at Faneuil Hall, Menino greeted them one by one on the sidewalk.

"Have you ever been to Faneuil Hall?" he asked, hand outstretched to a line of 9-year-olds. "It's big? It's exciting? It's better than your school, right?"

"I'd rather have it in our church," said Caitlin Fitzgibbon, 12, after she graduated with an armload of awards. She was crying, standing beneath an oil painting of Daniel Webster extolling the benefits of federal unity on the Senate floor. "But I think this is really good."

The archdiocese abruptly closed the school on Thursday to prevent what church officials feared was a planned occupation by parents. The school had been scheduled to close yesterday.

"The decision in Brighton was regrettable but necessary," archdiocesan spokesman Terrence Donilon said yesterday. "We understand the frustration and the anger, and we understood this would be a tough decision."

Donilon said no decision has been made about the future of the building, although O'Malley is "going to revisit that, with no timetable set."

Still locked inside the school are the children's goldfish, Bubbles and S'Mores; their butterfly, Pokey Ree; and the certificates that teachers had planned to pass out yesterday.

Instead, teachers filled out store-bought certificates on a bench in Oak Square before boarding the buses.

"It's not fair because all of our stuff is in there," said Jonathan Pierre, 12, a sixth-grader, who said he left \$20 in his desk in school. "Class pets will die because they're not given food. That's unless the archdiocese gives them food. I'm not sure that they'll do that."

Molly Saccardo, a sixth-grade teacher, comforted weeping children after the ceremony.

"There is such a community feeling in this school," Saccardo said, choking up. "Almost every single one of them said this is my second home, do not close my second home. How many people feel that way about their school?"

Still, the novelty of being downtown at the invitation of the mayor scored points.

"I can brag to my friends that I'm graduating at Faneuil Hall, because we've always had it at the church up at the school," said Aine Sheehan, 12, a sixth-grader. "It's just kind of amazing."

Colleen Curry, 11, a fifth-grader, was less exuberant.

"I think this is an awesome place to have a graduation, but I would rather have it at the church," she said, as she flipped through a scrapbook with photos of her class trip to the symphony and a Mass with a visiting priest.

Earl Smith, 10, a fourth-grader who is contemplating becoming a priest, said he was disgusted by the archdiocese closing his school.

"I don't think they should have," he said, a hand-scrawled "Honk for OLP" sign in his hand. "Jesus taught the exact opposite of what they're doing."

After the ceremony, students and parents retired to a reception room at Faneuil Hall, where they snacked on coffee and muffins. Some children raced around the room, which was decorated with antique firearms and flags.

"I've gone through the whole range of being angry and upset, but now it's culminated into just an outstanding awards ceremony and so much community support," said Caitlin's mother, Paula Fitzgibbon. ■