



Guilien Smith, 10, (L), Maggie Mulligan, 9, and Jenna Groen, 11, looked at some of the pets, which included fish and a butterfly, that were retrieved from the school yesterday. (Globe Photo / Patricia McDonnell)

O'Malley to meet school protesters

Our Lady dispute will be discussed

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By Maria Cramer, Globe Staff | June 12, 2005

Confronted with an outpouring of outrage over its decision to close a school before graduation ceremonies, the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston agreed yesterday to meet with angry parents and neighbors to discuss the future of the building, and even reconsider their proposal to purchase it from the church and turn it into a private school and community center.

Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley will meet tomorrow with representatives of the Our Lady of the Presentation School in Brighton's Oak Square, the two sides said in a joint statement. The announcement came the day after some parents, children, and community members began a campout in the Oak Square Common, across the street from the school, which was closed Wednesday, two days early.

Wearing a white T-shirt emblazoned with "The Struggle Continues!" Kevin Carragee, chairman of the Presentation School Foundation, a group of parents and community members protesting the closure, praised the decision to the cheers of about 50 protesters. They had posted signs reading "Shame on the Archdiocese" and "The Abuse Continues" around Oak Square Common and hung school uniforms stuffed with newspapers on wooden posts.

According to the statement, the meeting will review the foundation's "proposal to purchase the building," as well as "the needs of the Archdiocese." In addition, the school, which houses students in grades pre-K to 8, will be opened for two hours tomorrow morning so students can remove their belongings.

Parents reacted to news with astonishment that O'Malley had agreed to a meeting, and with caution fueled by the possibility that the school could be closed permanently.

"Man, I can't believe it. They're gonna talk to us," said Maria Rodrigues, who was one of the first parents to see the statement. "Somebody there has some brain, some heart."

But soon after, she added, "I hope this is a conversation and not a PR thing."

The archdiocese decided last year to close the school because of low finances and enrollment. The closure was delayed after parents protested.

But the archdiocese rejected the foundation's proposal to pay market value for the building and use it as a private school and community center. O'Malley has said he needs the building to house church offices for the Metropolitan Tribunal because its current building is being sold to Boston College to help pay for clergy sex-abuse case settlements.

The archdiocese closed the school two days early because it believed protesters might try to occupy the building before it closed permanently, spokesman Terrence Donilon said Thursday. Eight churches the archdiocese has closed are currently occupied by protesters.

But Donilon said yesterday that O'Malley had decided to meet with the Presentation School Foundation after seeing the effect of the closure on the children and their parents.

"This was not our intent to have it get to this level," Donilon said.

Told some were skeptical about the meeting, Donilon said: "What's the alternative? To not talk? We want to lower the volume, we really appreciate that they're willing to come in. Let's move on, let's get to a point where we can communicate . . . what's important is that we're talking."

Donilon said he didn't want to make any predictions about the outcome. "I don't have anything to say on that."

The foundation's protest was amplified by a torrent of criticism from politicians, led by Mayor Thomas M. Menino, a Catholic, who had sent a letter to O'Malley calling the school closing "reprehensible," "unconscionable," and a "heartbreaking insult."

Yesterday, Menino struck a more diplomatic tone.

"I'm very pleased that the Our Lady of the Presentation Foundation and the Archdiocese could come to an agreement to meet and discuss some of the issues that surround the school and find where there is common ground to work out some of the issues that have been a point of discussion recently," Menino said in a telephone interview yesterday, adding that he had talked to O'Malley twice in the past 24 hours to deliver the message that "all this tension and rancor and disagreement could all be avoided with better communication."

"I'm very happy they're allowing the kids back into the school to get their personal belongings," Menino said. "Maybe they will write a new chapter in the future of Our Lady of the Presentation."

But some of those gathered in Oak Square Common said they were dubious about what tomorrow's meeting might bring.

"I'd like to say it's good, but you never know what they're thinking," said Kim Dacy-Smith, 43, whose two sons attended the school. "A trust has been broken. It's hard to trust what they're really going to do."

Secretary of State William F. Galvin shared Darcy-Smith's circumspection.

"I'm pleased that they're doing this, but it shouldn't have taken this remarkable outpouring of anger," Galvin said.

"I remain skeptical," he said. "We'll see what they do."

He also said the parents should not perceive this as a "gift" from the archdiocese. "The whole approach has been particularly punitive to this community," he said.

Children have been concerned about the pets inside the building. At one point, someone from the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals showed up to make sure the animals inside -- fish, a butterfly, and a frog -- were OK. A church official also came to let in two parents, who retrieved the animals.

Parents and children had planned to camp in Oak Square Common for a full week. They had set up nine tents in the area, divided into "O'Malleyville" and "Lennonville," a reference to Bishop Richard Lennon.

"The ground is harder under Lennonville," said Stephen Ashcraft, 47, an alumnus of the school.

Late in the afternoon, the protesters cooled off with sprinklers and munched on pizza. Some planned to stay the night, including Earl Smith, a resident of Lennonville, who was still happy about the news.

"I would jump up and down," said the 10-year-old, exhausted from a day of protest and play in the hot sun. "But I'm out of energy."

Lisa Wangsness of the Globe staff contributed to this report. ■

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