



"The conflict of months and the intense conflict of recent days has ended," said Kevin Carragee (center), chairman of Presentation School Foundation, during a press conference outside the Chancery with Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley (right). (Globe Staff Photo / Bill Greene)

O'Malley, protesters end standoff over school Diocese to pursue sale to neighborhood group

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | June 14, 2005

Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley, stung by criticism over his decision to cancel the last two days of classes at a Brighton parochial school that is scheduled for closing, reversed a long-held position yesterday and agreed to pursue the sale of the contested school building to a neighborhood group.

The archdiocese and leaders of the Oak Square organization, called the Presentation School Foundation, cautioned that they had not reached a final deal. The parties have not agreed on the financial or other terms of a sale, and a sale by O'Malley would require approval from several archdiocesan councils.

But in a joint press conference on the steps of the Chancery after a meeting that lasted more than three hours, officials from both the archdiocese and the foundation said they had agreed to make "a good faith effort to pursue the goal of a negotiated sale," and they said the main sticking point was the exact future use of the building.

Both sides said they support the foundation's desire to run a preschool, afterschool and summer programs for children, adult education, classes in English as a second language, and other social services from the building. But the archdiocese expressed serious reservations about the foundation's proposal to open a private school in the building, because the school might draw children away from nearby Catholic schools struggling to maintain their enrollments.

The archdiocese, which for the last year has maintained that it would need the school building as offices for employees displaced by the sale of a portion of the chancery property to Boston College, said it might seek to maintain some space in the building for the church workers by agreement with the foundation. And the archdiocese said it was possible that some of the social services the foundation seeks to deliver from the building could be overseen or assisted by Catholic Charities.

The foundation agreed to end immediately a protest in the traffic circle in front of the school building, where neighbors and parents have been camped out since Friday. But the group said it would continue staging activities in the circle, called Oak Square Commons, that would illustrate the potential uses of the building.

The outlines of the deal were announced at an early evening press conference by O'Malley; the Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, president of Catholic Charities; and Kevin Carragee, chairman of Presentation School Foundation. The two sides said they had agreed to meet again in two weeks.

O'Malley, grim-faced and fingering the cross on his rosary, expressed "regret" for the events of last week. His decision to close the school early, citing concern that children could be endangered if protesters occupied the school, caused the cancellation of graduation ceremonies for pupils as young as 3, as well as the cancellation of the school's final Mass and other activities associated with the closing of the school. Parents later conducted a graduation ceremony for children ages 3 to 5 in the traffic circle in front of the school last Thursday, and on Friday, Mayor Thomas M. Menino, furious with the church, hosted a graduation ceremony for the older children at Faneuil Hall.

"We regret the unpleasant events of last week and the misunderstandings, but we had a very good dialogue and conversation and, I think, a very good outcome," O'Malley said. Asked what he regretted, he said he was referring to the "misunderstandings" that led to the cancellation of the school's final days, as well as "the pain that was caused."

Carragee, who has been sharply critical of the archdiocese's handling of his group's proposal, which was rejected and ignored over the course of a year, had nothing but praise as he emerged from the meeting. Yesterday's meeting marked the first time O'Malley has agreed to talk directly with the Brighton parents and residents.

"The conflict of months and the intense conflict of recent days has ended," Carragee said. "This is a good day for the city of Boston, it's a good day for the Archdiocese of Boston, and it's a good day for the Allston-Brighton community."

Carragee went from the press conference to nearby Oak Square, where the encampment of protesters had drawn mayoral candidate Maura Hennigan, state Representatives Kevin G. Honan and Michael Moran, Councilor Jerry P. McDermott, and nearly 30 parents and children. The crowd cheered as Carragee arrived, and some chanted "power to the people." They then set about taking down the tents and the protest signs, one of which had referred to the demonstration as "O'Malleyville," and packing up art supplies and food as they prepared to go home.

Archdiocesan officials repeatedly warned that, as Hehir said, "this is not a finished deal." Hehir said the proposal must be approved by a variety of archdiocesan panels, including the finance council, the real estate committee, and a reconfiguration oversight committee. Those panels have not in the past been known for their independent decision-making, although the finance council did reject a proposed abuse settlement as too high in 2002. But, according to several individuals close to the archdiocese, some church staff members can be expected to express concern about the precedent set by making concessions to protesters.

The conflict over the Presentation School building is one of multiple controversies faced by O'Malley, who has closed 63 of the archdiocese's 357 parishes over the last year, including the Presentation parish, and who plans to close another 17 or so. Eight closed parishes are currently occupied by protesters seeking to reverse parish closing decisions.

O'Malley has agreed to change several closing decisions in the face of protests, but his handling of the Presentation School controversy has drawn the most criticism because of the lockout of schoolchildren.

But, even as an unseasonable heat wave washed across the city, emotional temperatures lowered over the weekend.

On Saturday, a former student of the school was allowed in by security guards to rescue some fish and a butterfly from the classrooms; yesterday morning, the archdiocese allowed all students back in to retrieve their belongings. Danny Gentilucci, 10, went back to his classroom to get his artwork, including a picture of a dragon, and yearbook.

"As long as both parties are willing to move the issues along, I'm satisfied, and I will support them the best I can," said Menino, who spoke with O'Malley after the settlement talks last night.

Michael Paulson can be reached at mpaulson@globe.com. Globe Correspondents Heather Allen and Lisa Fleisher contributed to this report. ■