

School shuts to ward off parents Archdiocese says it tries to avert an occupation

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | June 9, 2005

The Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, seeking to head off the possible occupation of a closing Catholic school by angry parents, yesterday abruptly changed the locks, canceled graduation ceremonies for children as young as 3, and canceled the final two days of classes.

Archdiocesan staff members, including the superintendent of schools, called parents last night to tell them not to send children to school today or tomorrow at Our Lady of the Presentation School in the Oak Square section of Brighton. The archdiocese said it would provide space at a nearby Brighton parish for day care today and tomorrow.

A spokesman for Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley said the archbishop felt he had to shut the school early to protect the children.

"We had begun to gather information that a group of individuals were planning to conduct an unauthorized use of the school that could have involved any number of things, and the archbishop decided that for the safety of the children and the staff he did not feel it was appropriate that they should be dragged into the middle of this," said the spokesman, Terrence C. Donilon. "He had to make a regrettable but necessary decision. The safety of the kids comes first, and he did not want an unruly situation to erupt and to have kids exposed to it."

The closing of the Our Lady of the Presentation School has been the most contentious school closing in recent years, and it occurs amid a controversial effort by O'Malley to close a large number of parishes. In the last year, the archdiocese has closed 62 of its 357 parishes, including Our Lady of the Presentation Church.

Presentation School was slated to close last year, but O'Malley agreed to grant it a one-year extension after parents protested. O'Malley declined an offer from parents to buy the school, saying he needed the building to house a church office, the Metropolitan Tribunal, because the archdiocese is selling the current tribunal building to Boston College to help defray the cost of settling clergy sex-abuse cases.

In a statement last night, the archdiocese said O'Malley will reconsider the future use of the Presentation school building.

A small group of irate parents gathered last night in Oak Square.

"I can't understand why they would try to provoke people and anger them in this way," said Henry J. Ford, a registered nurse whose 4-year-old daughter was in a prekindergarten class at the school.

Parents at the school last night said they would hold their own graduation ceremony for the children at 8 a.m. today in the square outside the school. It was not clear what they would do about a series of planned rallies and other gatherings that were scheduled to begin tomorrow, four hours after children left the building, to protest the school closings.

The leader of the parent group, Kevin Caragee, called the situation "a lockout" and said, "It's outrageous."

Mayor Thomas M. Menino was angry last night and said of the archdiocese, "Don't they care about the human factor?" ■