



Evelyn Morano (L), 10, and Colleen Curry, 11, shed tears yesterday after learning that their Brighton school was closing. (Globe Staff Photo / Evan Richman)

Diocese shuts school early to prevent an occupation Parents assail action, plan Brighton rally

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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, called off 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 Catholic school, St. Columbkille, for day care today and tomorrow.

A spokesman for Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley said the archbishop believed 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."

But a leader of the Presentation School Foundation, a group protesting the school closing, said "the Presentation School Foundation was planning no takeover of the school." The group said it had obtained a city permit for a rally tomorrow afternoon in Oak Square and was planning a week of protest activities on the square.

"This is a lockout of children by an arrogant archdiocese," said Kevin M. Carragee, the group's chairman. "This is an archdiocese that has learned nothing from the clergy sex-abuse scandal. The archdiocese failed to take care of our children in the past and fails to do so today."

Our Lady of the Presentation is one of four Catholic elementary schools slated to close this year, as Catholic schools in Boston and other American dioceses struggle with declining enrollments and rising costs. According to the US

Conference of Catholic Bishops, there has been a net drop of 850 Catholic schools in the United States since 1990, with most of the closings in urban and rural areas, even as many suburban Catholic schools boast waiting lists. Since 2000, the number of students in Catholic schools around the country has dropped by 170,000.

The closing of the Presentation School is the most contentious in the Boston Archdiocese, which has been closing several schools a year. The anger over the Presentation School closing has been stoked, in part, by more general anger over O'Malley's effort to close a large number of local parishes because of a shortage of priests, worshipers, and money. Since last summer, the archdiocese has closed 63 of its 357 parishes, including, last year, 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. He declined an offer by the parents to buy the school.

The parents proposed paying what they said was market value for the school, and they said they would turn it into a private school and a community center. But O'Malley said he wanted the building to house a church agency, 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.

Converting the school to office use will require permits from the City of Boston, and Presentation parents have vowed to oppose the change in use.

In a statement last night, the archdiocese said O'Malley will now "revisit the future use of the building."

The parents have won support from a number of local political figures, including Secretary of State William F. Galvin, who lives in Brighton, and Mayor Thomas M. Menino. Last night, Menino was clearly angered by the decision to close the school early. He pledged to express his unhappiness to the archdiocese and asked, "Don't they care about the human factor?"

"This is disturbing, the cloak-and-dagger approach to closure," Menino said in a telephone interview. "These poor kids -- what kind of effect will this have on the children? It will leave an indelible mark on them. And this is not a way to treat parents who have worked so hard over the past year."

Several dozen irate parents gathered last night in Oak Square, as a thunderstorm began to move through the area, to express their unhappiness at the turn of events.

"I can't understand why they would try to provoke people and anger them in this way," said Henry J. Ford, whose 4-year-old daughter was in a prekindergarten class at the school. Ford said his daughter had been working on a picture showing her two teachers, whom she called Miss Julie and Miss Diane, and a rainbow, for presentation at a prekindergarten graduation ceremony today. "Why they would do this, I have no idea," Ford said.

Parents at the school last night said they would hold their own graduation ceremony for the youngest children at 8 a.m. today in the square outside the school. They said they were still trying to figure out what do about a planned graduation Mass and party for the older children tomorrow, but said they would hold a rally on the Oak Square commons tomorrow afternoon.

"This is an outrage, and it's ridiculous," said Loretta Magee, whose 12-year-old daughter is a sixth-grader at the school. "Of course, I asked the man who called why the school is closing, and he said there would be some kind of illegal occupation happening Friday and our children's safety was in danger, which is ridiculous, because all the parents had planned was a rally. My daughter was crying and very upset, as were most of her friends. It's hard enough knowing the school was closing, but having it end so abruptly is another slap in the face."

Parent Jennifer Doyle, said, "I can't believe that they are locking my daughter out of her graduation. I think it's despicable."

Among those gathered at Oak Square last night was Peter Borre, the chairman of the Council of Parishes, an alliance of closing churches. "This just seems a gross miscalculation on the part of the archdiocese, because this has inflamed parents who are standing here in the pouring rain," he said. "The disappointment to their children is huge."

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