

Plan to save OLP School in the works

By Erin Smith/ STAFF WRITER
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The community of Our Lady of the Presentation has come up with a creative alternative to the Archdiocese of Boston closing the school's doors this June - sell the school back to the community.

The archdiocese announced it would close the school last year, but agreed to keep the grammar school open until this June after protests from the community.

Although students, parents and staff would prefer to keep it an archdiocesan-run school, a group of OLP parents presented Archbishop Sean O'Malley with an alternative proposal to shutting down the educational facility. The proposal, entitled "Oak Square Partnership for Youth and Families," would allow the community to purchase the building and convert the school into a nonprofit education center that would be a part of a larger-reaching community campus in Oak Square, including the YMCA and the Faneuil Branch Library.

The proposal demonstrates how the under-utilized space in the OLP school building could generate revenue operating as an independent school while offering community meeting space for education and social programs and workshops, such as adult education, English as a second language, YMCA after-school programs and child day care. This would be much like the structure of the Jackson Mann Community Center.

Jack Fucci, executive director of the YMCA, said the Oak Square YMCA has already made a commitment to support the school financially by expanding its programs into the OLP school building should the archdiocese decide to keep it open. YMCA is looking to expand summer and after-school programs, as well as family education programs such as support groups and classes, said Fucci. If the archdiocese were to approve the proposal and the school building was renovated to meet building codes, the YMCA could bring its programs to OLP as soon as next September, said Fucci.

In an outpouring of community support, 23 prominent community associations and members have sent letter to the archdiocese in support of the proposal, including Mayor Thomas Menino.

In a letter to the Archdiocese of Boston dated Dec. 28, Menino voiced his support for the parents.

"After reviewing the proposal with an OLP parent this week, and based on what I saw at this year's OLP Auction and Christmas Bazaar events, I believe these local parents should succeed because they have demonstrated their earnest and deep commitment to work cooperatively for what is best for their families, their Church and their community," said Menino in the letter.

Other supporters of the proposal include the Aberdeen and Reservoir Civic Association; the Boston City Council; the Brighton-Allston Improvement Association; the Brazilian Immigration Center; Friends of the Oak Square Common; WGBH; and Sen. Steven Tolman.

City Councilor Jerry McDermott, an OLP alum, said the proposal "makes perfect sense" for the neighborhood by providing more meeting space for the community services. Although McDermott said he would prefer for the building to remain under archdiocesan control, he said he would fight to keep the building a school and oppose any plans to develop the land.

The school was previously financed through Our Lady of the Presentation Church. But when the archdiocese closed the church under its restructuring plan last August, teachers, parents and students began enthusiastic fund raising to pay school operating costs, such as teachers'

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salaries and health-care benefits. The school has raised thousands of dollars through community-supported fund-raisers this past fall. So far, the school has been able to pay all of its bills.

Although the archdiocese has never paid OLP teacher salaries, they do provide the education staff with pension funds. Teachers who are laid off or lose their jobs to a closing school are still eligible to receive pension payments for time served, provided they have been employed by the archdiocese for at least four years.

The archdiocese was not willing to comment for the story and would only say that the school is slated to close June 30, said Molly Horton of Rasky Baerlein, the public relations firm hired by the archdiocese.

The members of OLP and the community hope the archdiocese will reconsider.

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