

Catholic school lockout angers parents, officials Graduation ceremony held on traffic island

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | June 10, 2005

A group of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children, holding blue-and-yellow balloons to match their parochial school colors, yesterday marked the end of their year and the closing of their school with a graduation ceremony in the middle of a traffic circle, as police and private security guards made sure the children and their parents did not try to enter the locked building.

One day after the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston abruptly closed Our Lady of the Presentation School in Brighton's Oak Square to prevent possible occupation of the school by angry parents, neighborhood residents and political leaders responded with outrage to the decision by Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley to end school early, rather than risk a confrontation between parents and church officials in the presence of children.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino, a Catholic whose criticism of archdiocesan leaders has become increasingly pointed, sent a letter to O'Malley calling the action "reprehensible," "unconscionable," and a "heartbreaking insult." Menino offered the parents -- and they accepted -- the use of historic Faneuil Hall for the sixth-grade graduation and an award ceremony at 9 this morning.

Three years into a crisis that has seriously eroded the faith of many Catholics in church leadership, local politicians and parishioners unleashed a level of criticism yesterday that would have been unthinkable before the abuse scandal.

"They are a pack of thieves," said Councilor Jerry P. McDermott of Allston-Brighton, a graduate of Our Lady of the Presentation School who was baptized and married at the Presentation Church, which was closed last year. McDermott said he is talking with parents about filing civil suits against the archdiocese and said the attorney general should investigate the church's conduct.

"We own those schoolhouses, and we own those churches," he said. "Our parents and grandparents have paid over and over again to fix the boilers and replace the roofs and repair the windows and to pay for the priests and the nuns, and how dare they tell us now that it's not our building and change the locks and deny our kids their diplomas?"

"They had four pedophile priests assigned over the years to Our Lady of the Presentation, and now they want to protect the children? Isn't that refreshing? I'm not the best Catholic out there, but these are the supposed elders of the Catholic faith, and they've made a mockery of it."

State Representative Michael Moran, also a graduate of Our Lady of the Presentation School, said of the church leadership, "Lately the only thing the church seems to know how to do is to hurt people."

City Council President Michael Flaherty declared, "The archdiocese ought to be ashamed of itself; this is unconscionable. With everything that has happened . . . and everything that the church is supposed to stand for, I just don't know how they could do this."

The archdiocese said it had acted in a sincere effort to protect children. Spokesman Terrence C. Donilon said church officials had heard rumors that people would be smuggling in sleeping bags to facilitate a takeover of an occupation of the school building.

The archdiocese is closing the Presentation School because of low enrollment and weak finances; some parents and Brighton residents have criticized the archdiocese for refusing to sell the school building to them for use as a private school and community center.

"The archbishop stands by his decision, but he knows it's been an upsetting day for a lot of people," Donilon said. "It was not the decision he wanted to make, but it was the decision he had to make."

Donilon said the archdiocese believed that protesters would try to enter the school before it closed, as they have done at multiple churches, to make sure they were not locked out. Eight closed parish churches around the archdiocese are occupied by protesters; two other potential occupations were thwarted when pastors asked local police to arrest people who refused to leave.

"We had heard from a variety of sources that people would try to get in tonight," Donilon said yesterday. He said O'Malley wanted to prevent the possibility of having to help children get out of school while protesters were inside.

"A school is a place for children to go and learn; it is not a place for people to occupy or demonstrate inside or start a vigil," Donilon said. "The archbishop felt a child should be safe and secure in school. The archdiocese is prepared to take the criticism, but this was a very clear decision for him, and that's what leaders are supposed to do."

The chairman of the Presentation School Foundation, Kevin M. Carragee, has insisted that he knew nothing about a planned takeover of the school. He said the foundation had planned a weeklong series of protest activities in the Oak Square Commons, inside the traffic circle across from the school, and he offered a copy of a permit from the Boston Parks and Recreation Department as evidence that the group planned its protests in the park.

But a Presentation parent, a neighborhood activist, a priest, and McDermott -- none of whom support the archdiocese's action -- all said they, too, had heard discussion of a possible takeover of the school by residents unhappy with the archdiocese's handling of the planned school closing. Several said they had expected a one-week occupation of the school to coincide with the rallies in the square. "I'm sure there would have been a vigil," McDermott said.

Parent Kenna Sullivan, a graduate of Presentation school who had three children in the school, said: "Anything we were planning was peaceful."

Yesterday was to have been the graduation ceremony for the youngest children at the school, the parents and teachers decided to hold the ceremony outdoors.

The master of ceremonies, Tom O'Brien, a parent of twin second-grade girls at the school, said through a bullhorn: "This is their special day, and we're not going to let the Archdiocese of Boston take it away from them because of their delusional ideas that parents are going to hurt kids."

Police stood watch, but did not interfere; some of the officers hugged parents or greeted them by name.

Many parents said they had struggled with how to explain the school closing to their children.

"How can I, a devout Catholic, tell my children this is God's will?" asked Maria Rodrigues, whose 7-year-old son is a first-grader at Presentation School. "This is the twilight zone."

Caitlin Fitzgibbon, a 12-year-old sixth-grader, was one of several children who said they were told directly by archdiocesan officials of the school closing, because their parents weren't home. Several parents said they were upset that the archdiocese would relay such news directly to children.

Teachers were also upset. First-grade teacher Christine Falcone said she was at a Staples Wednesday night, preparing a presentation for her class, when a colleague called to inform her of the closing. She said she had no idea; her pupils' books, crayons, and a live pet fish were locked inside.

"I can't even comprehend what's going on," Falcone said. "We're here to help the children, and they're not helping."

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