

Appeal is planned on Gerard closure

'Cold decision' faulted; diocese says outcry futile

By Karen McCowan
The Arizona Republic

Gerard Catholic High School students and parents, upset over a decision by Phoenix Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien to close the school, will appeal the action by sending a letter and a petition to the bishop's superior in New Mexico.

"This cold decision does not minister to Catholics," states the letter, which about 200 parents and students said Wednesday they will send to Archbishop Robert Sanchez in Santa Fe later this week.

The parents also contended that they were kept in the dark about financial problems that are forcing the closure, and that they first would like to explore alternatives for keeping the school open.

But Phoenix Diocese officials told

the parents at a Wednesday night meeting that their protests are futile.

"The decision has been made," said diocese Superintendent Elizabeth Meeghan. "We are here to explain the process and listen to your pain."

Students and the press were barred from the meeting. Outside, nearly 200 students dressed in black participated in a candlelight vigil.

Earlier in the day, students wept with their principal at an emotional assembly that at times turned confrontational against O'Brien, who detailed why the school will be closed in June.

Many of the students wore school bumper stickers on their clothing, altered from "We Chose Gerard" to "He Closed Gerard." The makeshift signs referred to O'Brien's announcement Friday to close the 25-year-old parochial school, at 2252 N. 44th St.

The Rev. John Hanley, Gerard's principal since 1985, struggled to control his emotions as he told students that he began to question the school's future more than a year ago

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Gerard Catholic High School students (from left) Jason Mitchell, Courtney Morton and Debbie Brownlie participate in a candlelight vigil as parents meet with Diocese of Phoenix officials to discuss the closure.

Parents, students to appeal Gerard closure

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because of declines in enrollment and revenue.

Many students cried and most gave the principal a standing ovation as he described the stress caused by the decline in enrollment.

The school's enrollment has dipped from a high of more than 650 students in the early 1970s to about 250 students today, O'Brien said a projection of even lower enrollment next year — an estimated 222 students — helped seal the school's fate.

"If the school were viable, meaning at least 400 students, there would be hope," he said. "But the declining enrollment and huge financial operating deficit are impossible to ignore."

He said Gerard operated \$283,000 in the red in 1987-88, and is expected to lose \$320,000 this school year. The school's budget has been subsidized by the Phoenix Catholic Diocese.

O'Brien added that Phoenix Catholics are not alone in having to close a parochial school. The Washington, D.C., diocese, for example, recently closed three schools and consolidated four others into a single school.

O'Brien said that he continues to back Catholic education but that its future depends on financial and spiritual support from parents and pupils. Disappointed Gerard students told O'Brien that closing their school may erode that support.

"You have produced a loss of faith," said senior class president Glen Reimer. "Many students feel betrayed by the Catholic education system."

O'Brien said he understood those feelings.

"I know you are hurt, angry and heartbroken," the bishop said. "I want you to know I'm heartbroken as well. This is the toughest, worst decision I've ever had to make."

He urged them to rely on God's love in getting through their disappointment.

O'Brien also stressed that he never intended to mislead students when he pledged twice in the past year that Gerard would remain open.

"You may believe that I lied to you, that I have not kept my word," he said. "That is not the case. It was my expectation that Gerard would stay open. I fervently believed that and was committed to that."

He said he denied persistent rumors that the school was closing to keep enrollment from further eroding. The diocese also painted and reroofed the school and announced plans to bring in new staff from the Augustinian Order in an attempt to draw new students to Gerard, the bishop said.

Those steps, however, failed to stir new interest in the school, he said. The bishop also denied that Gerard students were being sold out for a fat profit on the sale of the school site.

"There are no immediate plans to sell Gerard," O'Brien said.

Diocesan officials say they have no plans to close any of the five other Catholic high schools in the Valley.

Student Jon Wolfmeyer asked if Gerard was being sacrificed to keep other Valley Catholic schools afloat, noting that Seton Catholic High in Chandler has a smaller enrollment.

Seton officials said Wednesday that about 200 students attend that school, down from about 250 last year. Projections indicate an enrollment of 230 next year, they said.

O'Brien replied that Seton, unlike Gerard, is in a rapidly developing part of the Valley.

"Seton needs time to see how it will grow. You've had 25 years here," the bishop said.

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