



St. Edward student Jake Walker with Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, who spoke at the Brockton school yesterday about changes coming next year. (Justine Hunt/ Globe Staff)

## Archdiocese tries new tack on schools Brockton merger is called a model

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | January 30, 2007

BROCKTON -- In the first test of a new strategy for revitalizing urban Catholic schools, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley announced yesterday that, with the help of wealthy donors and a local college, he will replace the last three parochial schools in this city with one regional school located in two refurbished buildings.

Archdiocesan officials said the Brockton effort -- an attempt to respond to declining enrollment, inadequate financing, and older buildings -- is a model that the church also looks to implement in Dorchester and Lowell.

The model, in which a regionalized Catholic school will be governed by a local board of trustees approved by O'Malley, is a break with the decentralized system of parish-financed parochial schools that has characterized Catholic education in much of the United States for more than a century.

The new regional school will give up some autonomy in exchange for considerable investment of financial and academic resources. Stonehill College, a Catholic institution located in neighboring Easton, has agreed to help with curriculum development, teacher training, and administration through the college's Center for Nonprofit Management. Suffolk Construction has agreed to renovate the two school buildings, and to build an addition for one of them, at cost. And businessman Jack Connors Jr. -- the chairman emeritus of the advertising firm Hill, Holliday -- is leading a committee aiming to raise about \$14 million to finance the project.

"Brockton is one of the poorest cities in the state, yet these families are looking for a faith-based, values-supported Catholic education," Connors, the chairman of an archdiocesan panel looking at the long-term future of Catholic education, said in a telephone interview. "One of the things so many of these Catholic schools have in common is financial trouble and resource famine, so all we're really trying to do is introduce the haves to the have-nots. It's a movement to bring some of the more wealthy resources of our faith to the neediest parts of our faith."

Enrollment in Eastern Massachusetts Catholic schools has plummeted by more than two-thirds over the last four decades. There are now about 50,000 students in the schools of the Archdiocese of Boston, 31,000 in elementary schools and 16,000 in high schools, down from 153,000 in 1965.

In Brockton, a city of 93,000 people, there are now just 525 students in the Catholic elementary schools. Many of the students are children of immigrants from Haiti and Cape Verde.

The costs of running Catholic schools have skyrocketed, as the decline in the number of nuns and priests, who worked

essentially for free, has required the schools to hire salaried laypeople, and as Catholic schools compete for pupils with schools that have better athletic facilities and technology.

O'Malley, who upon arriving in Boston in 2003 settled most of the clergy sexual abuse lawsuits and presided over the closings of scores of Catholic parishes, has made reviving the Catholic schools the next major priority of his administration. He enlisted numerous prominent and wealthy Catholic laypeople, led by Connors, to come up with a plan, and this strategic planning committee hired two prominent consulting firms to analyze the plight of the school system.

The Brockton consolidation is the first result of the committee's work. "Here, frankly, we saw that Catholic education was at risk, and the pastors were very concerned and were anxious for us to begin the process," O'Malley said in an interview after announcing the plan to several hundred schoolchildren gathered in the St. Edward School gymnasium, which was renovated five years ago with a donation from actor Mark Wahlberg.

"The schools have low enrollment and don't have enough resources, but we are confident that by bringing the schools together and sharing resources and by fund-raising and marketing together, that we're going to be able to strengthen the enrollment and to do the kind of staff development that we need to do and to have the facilities that are modern and with the kind of technology and the other needs that education has today," the archbishop said .

The archdiocese's other Catholic colleges and universities, -- including Boston College, Emmanuel College, Merrimack College, and Regis College -- are expected to help with other schools. Boston College is already heavily involved in attempting to shore up the last Catholic elementary school in Brighton, St. Columbkille.

The archdiocese chose Brockton first because the pastors were cooperative, Connors said. " Some pastors are more interested than others in taking a fresh look at the governance of schools, and in Brockton the pastors were the first to raise their hands," he said. "The cardinal was impressed by this and suggested this be the first place we go to sprinkle some of the alleged magic dust."

In Brockton, there are five parishes and three K-8 parish schools: St. Edward, St. Casimir, and Sacred Heart.

Next fall, under the plan announced yesterday, there will be one school, with a name to be determined, that will have two campuses. The lower campus will include pre-K through Grade 3 at an expanded and renovated St. Edward building, and the upper campus will house Grades 4 through 8 at a renovated building associated with the former St. Colman Parish.

Officials said there will be room for all students at the new school; they have not yet determined whether there will be jobs for all teachers. The schools will be administered by a regional director, and there will be a principal at each campus. Tuition will be \$3,000, but for students coming from St. Casimir and Sacred Heart, where tuition is now lower, grants will be made available to keep tuition flat for the first year.

The president and chief executive of Suffolk Construction, John F. Fish, said the schools will get refurbished classrooms; upgraded cafeterias, kitchens, and gyms; new playgrounds, music and art rooms, science labs, and computer equipment. The lower campus will get a 4,000-square-foot addition, he said.

Brockton priests interviewed yesterday expressed relief at the prospect of professional administrators overseeing the school, and said they expect all five Brockton pastors to be involved with the religious aspects of the school.

"It's hard losing buildings, but what we're getting is amazing," said the Rev. James A. Flavin, pastor of St. Edith Stein Church.

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