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Boston Catholic schools will enroll children of same-sex parents

by Tom Roberts



(CNS file photo. Digital altered by NCR)

The Archdiocese of Boston does not prohibit children of same sex parents from attending Catholic schools, and officials there have offered to help a child refused admittance to an elementary school because his parents are lesbian to enroll in another archdiocesan school, according to a statement released late this afternoon.

"We believe that every parent who wishes to send their child to a Catholic school should have the opportunity to pursue that dream," said Mary Grassa O'Neill, secretary for education and superintendent of schools for the archdiocese. "Our schools welcome children based on their parent's understanding that the teachings of the church are an important component of the curriculum and are part of the students' educational experience."

"The archdiocese does not prohibit children of same sex parents from attending Catholic schools," her statement continued. "We will work in the coming weeks to develop a policy to eliminate any

misunderstandings in the future."

The statement is in response to a controversy that erupted when the Associated Press reported that an eight-year-old boy was denied admission to St. Paul School in Hingham, Mass., after the pastor, Fr. James Rafferty, learned that the child's parents are lesbians.

The superintendent said that she had met with the pastor and principal "to learn more about their decision" and that she had also "contacted the student's parent and expressed my concern for the welfare of her child. I offered to help enroll her child in another Catholic school in the archdiocese."

O'Neill said the parent "was gracious and appreciative" and "indicated that she would look forward to considering some other Catholic schools that would welcome her child for the next academic year."

The incident is similar to a case in Boulder, Colo., where a pastor refused to admit a youngster to kindergarten after learning that her parents are lesbian, but the response from officials in Boston was quite different. In Denver, there was no hesitation Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, who defended the pastor saying that the church defines marriage as a heterosexual union and that children of same sex couples could face difficulties in a Catholic environment.

"Our schools are meant to be 'partners in faith' with parents," the archbishop said in a column published in the March 10 issue of the *Denver Catholic Register*, the archdiocesan newspaper. "If parents don't respect the beliefs of the church, or live in a manner that openly rejects those beliefs, then partnering with those parents becomes very difficult, if not impossible.

"It also places unfair stress on the children, who find themselves caught in the middle, and on their teachers, who have an obligation to teach the authentic faith of the church," he added.

A central question in such cases, however, is whether the church is serving the children or the parents. Critics of the Denver archdiocese's decision said that the church unfairly singled out lesbian parents when it doesn't screen other parents for violations of church law, such as remarrying after divorce without obtaining an annulment or use of artificial contraception.

The question of whether Catholic schools should admit children of same sex couples was one of the areas treated by Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, the outgoing superintendent of schools in the Archdiocese of Washington, during a talk at the recent Washington conference co-sponsored by Trinity Washington University and *National Catholic Reporter*.

Among the "big questions" Weitzel-O'Neill posed regarding Catholic education was: "Gay couples ? should they be allowed to send their children to Catholic schools? Because in Denver they were told they were not."

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Weitzel-O'Neill, who coincidentally is taking a position as executive director at the Center for Catholic Education at Boston's Lynch School of Education, asked, "Is it about the kids or the adults?"

Soon after the Boston story broke, Catholics United, a lay group headquartered in Washington, began an effort to collect 2,500 signatures on a petition seeking reversal of the action.

Chris Korzen, executive director of Catholics United, said that the group had collected more than 1,500

signatures by noon May 13 and hoped to have 2,500 to e-mail to the archdiocese by end of day. He said the group would continue to collect signatures over the next few days and hoped to deliver a hard copy of the petition and signatures to the archdiocese.

The petition notes that Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who was traveling with Pope Benedict XVI in Portugal, had yet to take a position on the school's decision. "If he hears from enough of us, we think he could be convinced to do the right thing and reverse the decision. This has nothing to do with the church's teaching on marriage or relationships. It's about making sure that everyone has the right to an education," the petition stated.

Read NCR coverage of the Boulder, Colo., incident: **Children denied Catholic schooling, lesbian couple speaks out**

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