

Catholic school officially ends paddling

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NEW ORLEANS -- A Catholic high school that was the country's last refuge of corporal punishment has ended a legal struggle over control of the school and agreed that the days of paddling are over.

"There will be no attempt to reinstate corporal punishment," said Dan Davillier, a board member of St. Augustine High School who helped fashion the out-of-court settlement on Dec. 23 with the Josephites, the Roman Catholic order that founded the school 60 years ago.

"It hasn't been at the school for the last year and a half. We want St. Aug to maintain its track record for strict discipline. I'm confident that we can maintain that high level without paddling."

Whether to paddle or not -- and who would decide the question -- became the issue that roiled the school for most of 2011. The Josephites, with the emphatic support of New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond, wanted it stopped.

But a broad coalition of parents, alumni and local board members, led by former school president Rev. John Raphael, wanted it continued as a key ingredient in the school's character-building tool kit.

But for Aymond and the Josephites, the issue touched on the school's identity as a place of Catholic values.

Weeks of public rallies and petitions culminated in late June when the local directors unilaterally attempted a legal takeover of the board of trustees. The Josephites responded with the lawsuit that ended with the new leadership structure.

Under the agreement, neither the board of directors nor the trustees can amend the school's bylaws or articles of incorporation without the assent of two-thirds of both bodies, said Davillier and the Rev. Tom Frank, the Josephites' No. 3 official.

"This insures much better communication and spirit of cooperation" between the two bodies, Davillier said.

The next step will be finding a new president for the school, after Raphael was recalled to Josephite headquarters in Baltimore during the dispute.

Davillier said the board of directors will conduct a search and recommend a replacement, who will be approved by the trustees.

Bruce Nolan writes for The Times-Picayune in New Orleans.