

Philly Catholic high schools close over strike

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PHILADELPHIA -- The Philadelphia archdiocesan Catholic education secretariat announced Sept. 13 that its 17 high schools would close Sept. 14 and not reopen until a settlement was reached with teachers on strike since Sept. 6.

The high schools opened Sept. 7 and were staffed by administrators and nonunion employees. The first few days of school were primarily devoted to orientation sessions.

In a letter to parents, school officials said continued reduced staffing could jeopardize student safety. They said missed days will be made up when the school year resumes and parents would then receive adjusted school calendars.

Both sides in the dispute met Sept. 8, 9 and 11 but were unable to reach an agreement, though the education secretariat's announcement reported "some progress in the negotiations."

A statement from the archdiocesan communications' office said the Secretariat for Catholic Education was "making every effort to minimize disruption to the academic year and bring a speedy resolution to the strike. We are anxious for our teachers to return to the classroom as soon as possible."

Rita Schwartz, president of the Association of Catholic School Teachers Local 1776, likewise said in a letter to schoolteachers that the union was "working very hard to get the contract resolved and get our teachers back to work."

Most of the more than 700 striking teachers voted against the archdiocesan contract proposal presented Sept. 6.

"The main issue now and since the beginning has centered on job security," Schwartz told Catholic News Service.

Richard McCarron, archdiocesan secretary for Catholic education, said the archdiocese had contacted the teachers' union and was willing to resume negotiations.

"This is not a contract for the past, it's a contract for the future," McCarron said during a Sept. 6 press conference. "If we are to educate our students to enter a very rapidly changing world, then we need to be able to deliver the educational services that are going to prepare them for this world. That doesn't necessarily mean holding on to the same ways we have done things."

"It is a sad day for the archdiocese," he added, "because we are here to educate 16,500 students and their well-being and our parents' concern for their education is (paramount) to us."

McCarron said the contract dispute was not primarily about salary and benefits but about "the delivery of educational services" such as hiring part-time teachers to meet changing educational needs.

He singled out modern language programs in particular, where plans to establish courses in Farsi and to expand existing two-year Mandarin Chinese courses to four years would require hiring teachers with specialized skills.

Hiring part-time teachers is one of the proposals that have proven troublesome in the contract. McCarron said the teachers had been misinformed by their association leadership about the implications of the part-time hires.

He said teachers have been told that they will be replaced by part-time teachers, which he said is incorrect. "We have said across the table all summer long that when the student-teacher ratio is defined, no part-time teacher will ever replace a full-time teacher."

McCarron was also asked about "constriction and bumping," another aspect of the contract the teachers' association members have said could hurt their job security because if school enrollment declines certain teachers would be constricted or "bumped" from the faculty to retain the established student-teacher ratio.

In previous years, the teachers were automatically assigned to a new school. The proposed contract changes this procedure and would require teachers to be interviewed at a school with an opening and their subsequent hiring would be based on particular qualifications.

Schwartz said the teachers were understandably concerned about their chances of being rehired once their school was closed or enrollment went down.

The teachers' union has been part of the Philadelphia Archdiocese since 1968. For the past five months, both sides have been negotiating a new contract to replace the three-year contract that just expired.

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