

# Archbishop unable to keep school open

By Karen McCowan  
The Arizona Republic

Archbishop Robert F. Sanchez has no authority to overrule Phoenix Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien's decision to close Gerard Catholic High School, a spokesman for the Santa Fe Archdiocese said Thursday.

About 500 students and parents associated with the east Phoenix school have signed petitions asking Sanchez to intervene in O'Brien's decision to close the school in June.

But the Rev. Donald J. Starkey, chancellor of the archdiocese in Santa Fe, N.M., said Sanchez's position as archbishop is primarily an honorary one. Arizona is part of the province within the Santa Fe Archdiocese.

"The basic idea is that an individual bishop has authority and jurisdiction in his own territory," Starkey said.

"The archbishop holds a place of honor, but has no authority whatsoever in another bishop's territory."

Sanchez could not be reached for comment. But Starkey said the most

the archbishop could do is ask to meet with O'Brien to discuss the matter.

"It is a mistake for the people to think Archbishop Sanchez can interfere," Starkey said. "He has no authority to change or overrule the decision."

O'Brien's only superior is Pope John Paul II, the chancellor said.

"The people can take their complaint to (the pope) and ask that it be investigated by the Vatican, just as people have a right to appeal to the Supreme Court," Starkey said.

The Vatican is unlikely to investigate the issues, however, unless there is "some miscarriage of church law or doctrine," he said.

O'Brien has said the closure is due only to declining enrollment and a rising operating deficit.

Students and parents protesting the decision have complained that O'Brien has refused to grant them an opportunity to raise enough funds to keep the 26-year-old school open.

Susie Opalinski, whose son is a junior at Gerard, is the chief organizer

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to keep the school open. She mailed the petitions to Sanchez on Thursday.

She said parents and students also may appeal to reach Vatican officials, but they still hope their letter to Sanchez may lead to a reconsideration of the decision to close the school.

"We were looking for the archbishop not so much to overrule as to intervene," she said.

Opalinski said the group "cannot accept" O'Brien's decision, based on the reasons he has stated.

"We have been told it is a financial decision, but we have offered to provide the financial assistance to solve the problem, and he has refused," she said.

O'Brien has said Gerard's annual operating deficit, expected to reach \$319,000 this year, is too large to be solved by fund-raising efforts.