

## Diocese to close school

### Parents, students to stage protest

By Mary A.M. Gindhart  
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The Catholic Diocese of Phoenix will close the doors of one of its six Valley high schools at the end of the year, a victim of declining enrollment and higher operating costs.

Gerard Catholic High School, which opened in 1962 at 2252 N. 44th St., will close in June, according to a letter from Bishop Thomas O'Brien mailed Friday to parents of students and alumni.

Leslie Ullstrup, who has a son, Jack, and daughter, Sally, in the school, said parents are upset by the sudden announcement and plan to picket the school today.

"The way it was done, we're pretty upset," Ullstrup said. "I feel we've been lied to and betrayed. The bishop is the bad guy right now. I guess it's just big business. The school is on a valuable piece of property."

Ullstrup said that after protesting the plans for the closure at the school from 6 to 8 a.m., the parents and students plan to protest at the 9 a.m. Mass of SS. Simon and Jude Church. The Mass is in honor of Catholic Education Week, which began Monday.

In his letter, O'Brien said the decision to close Gerard is final. But he invited parents, students and alumni to discuss the closing at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the school. Diocesan officials, including O'Brien, could not be reached for comment Monday.

Terry O'Neill, president of the Gerard Alumni Association, said the news did not come as a surprise, because of the school's declining enrollment. There are 250 students in Grades 9 through 12 enrolled in Gerard this year.

"In the 1970s, in its heyday, there were as many as 700 to 800 students," O'Neill said.

In the letter, O'Brien said a committee formed in June to study local Catholic education had "come to grips with unfortunate realities" of declining enrollment and the high cost of operating the school.

"This action does not, in any way, diminish my support and appreciation of the value of Catholic education," O'Brien wrote. "We just need to find a more cost-effective and realistic way of providing that education to our children."

O'Neill said studies show that there are more high-school-age Catholic children north and east of the area where Gerard is located. He said that two nearby public schools, East High School, which closed, and Arcadia High School, which suffered declining enrollment, have had their problems.

The closure of Gerard will leave five Catholic high schools in the Valley. They are Brophy College Preparatory, Xavier High School, St. Mary's High School, and Bourgade Catholic High School, all in Phoenix, and Seton High School in Chandler.

John Volpe, a member of the parents committee fighting to keep the school open, said he believes the decision to close Gerard can be changed.

"The decision to close the school is based on certain information, and I believe we have other information that, when it is considered, can change that decision," said Volpe, who declined to elaborate.