

Bishop laments decision on contraceptives

PORTLAND, Maine – Bishop Richard J. Malone of Portland criticized an Oct. 17 vote by the Portland School Committee to allow girls as young as 11 years of age at one of its middle schools to obtain birth control at the school's health center.

"The school committee's decision is flawed on many levels," Bishop Malone said in an Oct. 18 statement. "It communicates to young people that adults have given up on forming young people in virtues like chastity. It promotes a purely pragmatic response to the moral problem of sexual activity in young people."

Bishop Malone added, "When contradictory messages are given to children from important authority figures such as parents and school officials, it can only create more confusion and difficulty for children themselves in making this important life decision."

Under the policy, which passed 7-2, students would need parental permission to use the city-run health center at King Middle School, but students would not be obligated to tell their parents they were seeking birth control.

The intent of the policy was to be able to distribute birth control to students of high school age who are still in middle school and unable to access the contraceptives available in high school. But school committee chairman John Coyne, who opposed the policy, said a physically mature and savvy 11-year-old "could navigate the system" to get birth control once the permission slip to use the health center is signed.

With 510 students, King Middle School is one of three middle schools in the Portland school district. One pregnancy of a King student was reported last year. In the past five years, seven pregnancies were reported from all three middle schools, according to Douglas Gardner, director of the city's health and human services department.

At King Middle School, 28 percent of the student body is foreign-born; languages spoken by its students number 31. Also, 54 percent of its students are part of the

federal free-lunch program. The school serves wealthier neighborhoods, downtown Portland, low-income apartment complexes and students who live on Casco Bay's islands, many of whom have to take ferries to get to and from school each day.

"I believe that it is possible for children and young people to make wise moral choices given caring guidance. They also need to know that when they might fail, adults will stand by them and not abandon them," Bishop Malone said. "Everything about this decision gives kids the wrong message."

The health center has distributed condoms since 2000. Because it could not prescribe birth-control pills, according to King principal Michael McCarthy, nurses would refer students to the Maine Medical Center or Planned Parenthood, although the girls rarely followed through, he said.

"I appreciate local officials trying to address a need in a medically appropriate way, but these are children," said Maine Gov. John Baldacci in an interview with The Associated Press.