

Boston Archdiocese says no ‘categories’ of students will be excluded

BRAINTREE, Mass. – A new Catholic schools admission policy in the Archdiocese of Boston says schools must “not discriminate against or exclude any categories of students” while at the same time acknowledging the autonomy of parish and school officials to make admissions decisions at the local level.

Cardinal Sean P. O’Malley pledged to develop the new policy after a May 2010 incident that made national headlines when a Hingham Catholic school rescinded the acceptance of a child of lesbian parents.

At the time, archdiocesan officials reacted negatively to the decision but noted there was no specific archdiocesan policy covering the situation.

The new Archdiocesan Catholic Schools Admission Policy, distributed Jan. 12, says schools “do not discriminate against or exclude any categories of students.” The policy does not define what is considered a category.

“Our schools welcome, and they don’t discriminate against any categories of students,” said Mary Grassa O’Neill, secretary for education. “It covers all categories of students.”

Father Richard Erikson, vicar general and moderator of the curia, said, “Catholic education is a treasure of the church, and we want to share that as broadly as we can.”

“We will not exclude any category of child from our schools and we expect pastors will be in conformity with the decision,” he added.

The policy also maintains the rights of pastors, principals and other staff to develop admissions policies for their schools. “Admission is dependent both on academic qualifications and the desire to promote what is in the best interest of the student,”

the policy reads.

It acknowledges the “principle of subsidiarity,” which says decisions should be made at the lowest practical organizational level in the church.

“Admissions decisions are still made at the local level,” O’Neill said.

She said the new policy allows school personnel to consider other aspects of applicants, including academic background, financial situation and possible need for student support services.

O’Neill declined to speculate how this policy would have affected the Hingham case but stressed that this is the policy moving forward and it is now codified.

The Archdiocese of Boston is also encouraging schools to place their own admissions policies in their handbooks and provide prospective applicants with policy information before registering the child.

The Catholic Schools Office is available to assist pastors and principals if they have any questions on the application of the policy, O’Neill said.

O’Neill also pointed out that the new archdiocesan policy ensures Catholic schools are in line with federal nondiscrimination standards. Many of the archdiocese’s Catholic schools are legally sanctioned nonprofit organizations and each year must sign a nondiscrimination clause.

She said that in formulating the archdiocesanwide policy, officials wanted to clarify older guidelines that she said were vague.

The text of the admissions policy says its developers were guided by previous remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI, canon law and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Father Erikson and O’Neill also said the policy has significance for parents seeking to place their children in Catholic schools and the pastors and principals who make admissions decisions.

Father Erikson said the policy means that parents enroll their child with the

understanding their child will be taught the Catholic faith and be required to participate in religious services that are part of the school's curriculum.

"What it means is we are dedicated to excellent faith-based education, and parents who enroll their children in Catholic schools (should expect that) their children will be taught fully the Catholic faith," he added.

The new policy was formulated by a team of archdiocesan officials, including the Presbyteral and Pastoral Councils, principals and pastors, including Father James Rafferty, the pastor of St. Paul School in Hingham, the school which ignited the controversy in May.

"The archdiocese has now finalized that document and I welcome the fact that we now have a clear policy to guide us in the important work of Catholic education," said Father Rafferty in a statement provided to The Pilot, Boston archdiocesan newspaper.