

Philadelphia Catholic high schools reopen after two-week strike

PHILADELPHIA - Students at 17 Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia returned to their classrooms Sept. 20 after lay teachers ratified a three-year contract and ended a two-week strike.

School officials called the contract, which was ratified by a 589-41 vote, with one abstention, “truly the watershed agreement we had hoped to obtain for the current and future benefit of students, parents, teachers and administrators.”

Richard McCarron, secretary for Catholic education, and Mary E. Rochford, superintendent of schools, said in a Sept. 19 letter to parents and guardians that the contract contains several elements “that we view as essential to continued educational excellence for our schools in a 21st-century learning landscape.”

These included participation by all teachers in an online grading system; an increase in instructional time for students and professional development time for teachers; the use of part-time teachers for “specialized and unique courses”; a revised process for granting tenure; and advance approval of lesson plans for all teachers beginning with the next school year.

The 711 lay teachers had objected to several proposals by the archdiocese, including one that would have allowed anonymous student complaints against a teacher. That proposal was revised to require that complainants be named if disciplinary action could be taken against the teacher.

Rita Schwartz, president of the Association of Catholic Teachers Local 1776, said the strike, which began Sept. 6 and led to the closing of the schools Sept. 14, “was never about the money. It was about respect.”

Under terms of the ratified contract, the teachers will receive raises of \$1,300 in the first year, \$1,400 in the second year and \$1,600 in the third year.

The union had twice asked for the archdiocese to enter into mediation about the

contract but was turned down, according to Schwartz.

“We firmly believe that we are able to obtain acceptance from the teachers’ association on the key elements ... because we remained at the table negotiating with them in good faith,” McCarron and Rochford said in their letter. “The introduction of a mediator could have watered down many of these provisions to the detriment of our students.”

Theresa Ryan-Szott, archdiocesan director of secondary school personnel and chief negotiator for the archdiocese, said the central issue for the archdiocese was “creating a spiritual and educational environment that was 21st century for our students.”

“We accomplished a tremendous amount of educational initiatives through this contract,” she added. “We are excited about the changes that are going to be able to take place in our schools, for our students, our parents and our teachers.”

Rochford said students missed five days of instruction during the strike. “Parents will be receiving a letter from us today notifying them that there will be five days that the students will be in class that were not previously scheduled,” she said. “The schools will communicate the days to the parents. We have several holy days when the students will now be in school, and there are other holidays that the schools had planned that we need to take back to make up those five days.”

Contributing to this story was Elena Perri in Philadelphia.