

# St. Mel survived on old school ties

TUESDAY THE old school proved that it practices what it preaches—it did exactly what it repeatedly has told its students to do.

"Believe in yourself," was the philosophy drilled into each student's head. "Keep trying and you'll make it."

Simply by opening its doors and letting the students in Tuesday morning, Providence-St. Mel's, the big old half-empty high school on Chicago's West Side, did all of that.

"We believed in ourselves," says principal Paul Adams. "We kept trying all summer. We raised the money and we finally made it."

MADE IT against some pretty tough odds—a lot of educators shook their heads and murmured, "Too bad, but you'll never do it."

Not when the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago says no—they couldn't afford to run the school anymore, so they were going to close it down.

Not when the school is as old as it is and in disrepair. Not when the enrollment is falling—the kids who do come here aren't rich, and their parents ar-



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en't influential.

Not when the school is located in a depressed neighborhood — booze, drugs, and prostitution abound, dropouts hang out across the street drinking whiskey in the park, and 40 per cent of the people along the cracked sidewalks can't get a job.

Not when the school is all black and the principal is, too.

"NO, SAID THE skeptics, who said they were realists. "Nice thought to keep this little all-black, inner-city school alive, especially when it does so well with these kids—sends over 80 per cent of them on to college. Nice thought."

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## How St. Mel survived

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But no Catholic high school defies the archdiocese and makes a go of it on their own."

But Tuesday Providence-St. Mel's did. It opened for business just as the principal said it would.

And the students—who have a curious habit of saying, "Yes sir, and 'No, sir," who don't smoke cigarets on the school grounds, or blow dope in the bathrooms or mouth off to teachers; who do their homework and don't skip classes, and raise money to paint the school and have to be asked to leave long after classes are over because they just like being there—these students came to their first day of school Tuesday with smiles on their faces.

**THE TEACHERS, janitors, and clerks** came to school with smiles on their faces—everybody was glad to be back.

The minute the first bell rang, the school settled down and the learning began — no chaos, no problems, no shrieking or screaming in the halls.

"I'm so ecstatic," said Harvey Gross, both a counselor and teacher at the school. "I woke up this morning with a grin on my face. This is the day we've been talking about ever since the archdiocese told us last April that they were going to close us down."

"We've always told the kids here to believe in themselves. It's not always easy to do. The teachers who believed in us stayed on."

"The students and parents who believed in us stayed with us. We really showed them we are a school that works."

"WE'RE JUST practicing what we preach," says principal Adams, looking a bit wearied from the endless summer job of raising money. Adams, who also fills in as part-time janitor, has moved into the empty convent next to the school so he can be available around the clock.

"We've had a lot of people believe in us. The nuns who rent us the building believed in us. People all around the country who've never been to Chicago sent us money. We made our \$160,000 goal by September and we have it. The rest we'll be getting in—\$240,000 in

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tuition and more than \$80,000 from bingo games.

"Sure, we've had to cut corners. We had to cut out a few programs. Our whole sports fund is only \$3,000 for the whole year."

"But we're open and I'm already worrying about the next year—fall of 1979. I don't want this to be a one-year shot. When I said we will stay open, I meant open for good."

"AS A TEACHER I'd never think of going on strike against a school like this," says Julius Walker, who, as full-time substitute, librarian, and basketball coach frequently is at the school past midnight.

"It just means too much to me. Dedication sound corny, I know. But most of us feel this way about our school. This place is the ideal — the kids are happy here; the parents are happy that they are here; the teachers are happy to be teaching here; and the kids are learning."

Isn't that the model of what a school is supposed to be?"

"The Cardinal vetoed our staying alive last spring, but I think God overrode his decision."

"YOU KNOW," said Adams, sitting in his half-furnished office, "this effort was supposed to be a disaster. Look at the neighborhood we're in. Look at the money we needed. Look at this old building that needs repairs. Look at the fact that the school is all-black and has a black administrator. People think blacks are not supposed to make it."

"Maybe we made it because of the odds—the odds were so much against us. But we did it. We got some big checks. But most of them were little ones. Not a day goes by that we don't still get a check for \$25 in the mail."

"It's a victory," says Cross, still smiling halfway through the day. "A special kind of victory because it's a victory without losers. The parents won, the community won, the teachers won, and the kids won. Nobody can lose when a school like this lives on."