

4/11/78

Providence-St. Mel backers call it something 'special'

By Jacqueline Thomas

More than 85 per cent of Providence-St. Mel's graduates go on to college. And most seem to do well.

That is an enviable record for a city high school, particularly one on Chicago's West Side.

Over the years, Providence-St. Mel has earned a reputation as a no-nonsense place. "No excuses are allowed here," one faculty member remarked. "We don't accept 'culturally deprived' and all that crap. And we get results."

Other supporters sum it up by saying the school is "special."

The North Central Assn. of Colleges and Secondary Schools — the regional accrediting body — apparently agrees. Its most recent evaluation refers to "unusually dedicated" administrators and teachers who serve as "strong and caring models" for students.

Students were described as well-behaved, with the building clear of graffiti and the atmosphere "free and happy."

On the negative side, the association's report said, "The administration and staff spend themselves and their time trying to bridge the budget gap. There is insufficient assistance from the archdiocese of Chicago.

"So much good is being done sans material aids and equipment," the evaluating team observed, that "one wonders, with financial assistance, what they could do."

THE SCHOOL NOW is mustering all its resources just to keep going. The archdiocese of Chicago says that barring a miracle, Providence-St. Mel, the last Catholic high school on the West Side, will close June 30.

It cites the high cost of much-needed repairs to the school building at 119 S. Central Park and an enrollment decline in the last 10 years linked, in part, to the fact that there are not as many Catholics among the blacks who replaced fleeing whites in city neighborhoods.

Msgr. Francis A. Brackin, vicar general and delegate of the archbishop for adminis-

tration, notes that only 6 to 7 per cent of Chicago blacks are practicing Catholics.

Paul Adams, principal of the high school, counters by saying that enrollment is again on the upswing and "every year, with a lot of effort, we grow toward being financially self-sufficient."

The issue, he says, isn't just money. "The Church purports to be concerned for the poor and disenfranchised," he says. "It has a strange way of showing that concern. It withdraws such human services as a good education from the very people who, if this school is closed, have no alternatives other than the public school system."

THE SCHOOL HAS weathered storms before. Its existence was threatened five years ago. Five years before that two financially strapped schools — Providence for girls and St. Mel for boys — merged to avoid collapse.

If providence doesn't save Providence-St. Mel, faculty, parents and others say they will.

Jasper Roy, a spokesman for the 12 black Roman Catholic deacons who work on the West Side, said a letter has gone out to the more than 300 deacons in the Chicago area asking for their help. "We'd like to enlist the support of Roman Catholics from around the city," Roy says.

Adams, meanwhile, said at a press conference Friday that faculty and parents plan to at least double the \$94,000 they raised this year — in addition to tuition — in order to reopen the school in September. A rally is planned for April 18.

Among the well-wishers is the Rev. George Clements, pastor of Holy Angels Church on the South Side. The Holy Angels elementary school has gone the same route and today proudly says its motto is: "We got it together by ourselves."

Father Clements says he believes "it is extremely important for parents to realize that the archdiocese is really stretched out financially and that they have to assume a great deal of responsibility themselves. I hope they will be able to do just that."