

UPDATED: Schools protected from St. John's archdiocese financial restructuring: board

Premium content

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Published: a day ago

Updated: 15 hours ago



The former St. Pius X (Tenth) School on Elizabeth Avenue in east-end St. John's is now called Rennie's River Elementary School. — Joe Gibbons/The Telegram

Until the NLESD no longer needs them, all 34 schools in the metro area owned by the Roman Catholic church won't hit the market



ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — A total of 34 public schools are still technically owned by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. John's, but they are protected from being sold because they are still in use, the Newfoundland and Labrador English School Board (NLESB) says.

The archdiocese is going through a major financial restructuring, working with a team of advisers, as it must settle compensation claims with victims of sexual abuse by certain Christian Brothers at the former Mount Cashel boys' orphanage in the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

Archbishop Peter Hundt's message to parishioners last weekend was to expect some church-owned properties to go up for sale, as well as the consolidation and downsizing of parishes.

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But the school board says the former Catholic-run schools that it still operates — after Newfoundland and Labrador ended denominational education more than 20 years ago — will not be up for grabs.

All 34 existing schools are expected to remain open for the foreseeable future, the NLESD says.

"The church is not able to sell a property out from underneath the district as long as the facility continues to be used for educational purposes," the board said in a statement responding to The Telegram's query about the former Catholic-run schools.

After the end of the denominational education system, Section 84 of the Schools Act, 1997 mandated agreements be reached with denominational authorities where the title to property used for educational purposes is held by the authority, the board said.



The former Holy Cross Junior High School on Rickett's Road in the centre St. John's area has since become a French language school and is now named 'Ecole Rocher Du Nord'. — Joe Gibbons/The Telegram

This included school board properties owned by the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corp. of St. John's. Among them are Brother Rice, Rennie's River Elementary, Holy Cross, Beaconsfield and St. Matthew's. The archdiocese stretches beyond the metro area to the Burin Peninsula and includes any former Catholic schools that are still open.

The agreement outlines the process governing use of the properties and sets out the procedure for disposition of them should the district decide they are no longer needed for educational purposes.

The board declined to provide the agreement to The Telegram, as it involves a third party.



St. John's lawyer Geoff Budden has fought for more than 20 years for victims of sexual abuse at the former Mount Cashel orphanage in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. TELEGRAM FILE PHOTO

St. John's lawyer Geoff Budden, who successfully won the ruling for abuse victims, said while it is true that the episcopal corporation cannot claim or sell these schools, it can sell or assign its reversionary interest in them.

"Institutional investors sometimes buy such an interest, at heavily discounted prices perhaps, with a view to acquiring these assets down the road — even, in some cases, decades down the road," Budden said.



Brother Rice Junior High School on Bonaventure Avenue in centre St. John's used to be Brother Rice (senior) High School under the old Roman Catholic school board. — Joe Gibbons/The Telegram

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court of Canada refused to hear the church's appeal of a decision by the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court of Appeal siding with victims of sexual abuse in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. The Roman Catholic archdiocese has been held vicariously liable — it had claimed that the Christian Brothers lay order was independent and therefore the church could not be blamed for the horrific acts of abuse that occurred at the orphanage.

The January ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada ended a battle — for former residents who are now elderly men — of more than 20 years led by Budden.

Besides the 60 clients of Budden's firm, the decision could also affect the unresolved cases of about 20 other claimants represented by various other lawyers. And more than a dozen potential claimants have come forward to Budden since the landmark ruling.

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