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CLEVELAND — A fire that caused \$1 million in damage to a Catholic school in suburban Cleveland Feb. 19 was deliberately set, fire investigators said.

The blaze at St. Anthony of Padua School in Parma, Ohio, destroyed the basement and damaged first-floor classrooms. Smoke and water damage was prevalent through much of the rest of the building, including the gym, the Parma Fire Department said.

No one was in the building at the time.

The school is located on a large property that includes a parish church and rectory and is shared with Padua Franciscan High School and its athletic facilities, all of which were undamaged.

Father Dale Staysniak, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Parish, credited firefighters for quickly extinguishing flames after smoke was discovered coming from a vent by a maintenance staff member who was driving around the school.

"The insurance people said the fire department did an excellent job minimizing the damage," Father Staysniak told Catholic News Service.

Parma Fire Chief Michael Lasky estimated that about 60% of the building was affected by fire, smoke and water.

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The blaze originated in a multipurpose room in the basement and likely burned for several hours before spreading to classrooms on the ground floor of the building, Lasky said.

"Unfortunately, it's impossible to know how long it was burning. It was undetected for a long period of time and allowed for the intensity and the wide scope of the damage," he said.

Father Staysniak said the school has experienced broken windows in recent weeks, but that there was no evidence of entry until the fire was discovered.

Lasky told Cleveland.com that firefighters responding to the blaze found equipment that was believed to be used to break a window in the rear of the building to gain entry.

The Parma Fire Department issued an appeal to the community to help find those responsible for the fire. A cash reward has been set for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the arsonist.

Firefighters from four area departments joined in fighting the blaze and were able get it under control in about 45 minutes.

Classes were canceled the week of Feb. 21 as teachers and school administrators began planning to relocate classes across town to the former St. Bridget of Kildare School, which closed in June.

Father Staysniak said it would take one to two weeks to make the transition. "The school is walk-in ready," he said.