News



A sign illustrates men's and women's restrooms. (OSV News/Reuters/Wolfgang Rattay)



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As a third-year medical student who is simultaneously earning a master's degree in public health, Thomas Luke crams his days with hospital rotations and study. But when he learned last July that a new diocesan gender identity policy would be implemented at his alma mater, St. Thomas More Catholic High School in Lafayette, Louisiana, he added advocacy work to his schedule.

"I believe at its core the policy is unsafe, because of how it can impact the mental health of young people," said the 25-year-old. Luke, who is gay, eked out time to establish a group of St. Thomas More alumni asking the diocese to "revisit the policy with Christlike compassion and love."

About a month later, in Omaha, Nebraska, a group of Catholic school parents, alumni, grandparents, students and parishioners formed to address the gender policy to be implemented in their Midwest archdiocese.

Suicide hotline

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline — 988.

"As Catholics we are called to protect the vulnerable and marginalized, to make sure they are safe and cared for, and we had serious concerns about the adverse outcomes of this policy," said Omaha resident Kaela Volkmer.

The grassroots efforts — We Demand More in Lafayette and Catholic Families for Love in Omaha — organized as a handful of new or updated written policies on gender and sexuality were released in Catholic dioceses across the U.S. last year.

The total number of such policies and guidelines has slowly inched upward; there are now about 34 in place. In January a new policy went into effect in the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, and the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, issued a catechesis and guidelines on gender identity.

The two local groups' critiques of the policies highlight concerns articulated by numerous LGBTQ activists as well as educators, administrators, students and parents nationwide. They say the diocesan documents are often crafted without sufficient dialogue and transparency. And they point to a lack of input from reputable mental health and medical experts, and LGBTQ individuals themselves.

Julia Pick is principal of an Omaha Catholic school who said she will leave her post at the end of the year because of her diocese's new gender policy.

"I can't imagine how it makes children feel who are just trying to figure themselves out," Pick told NCR. "The archdiocese is not leading with love but politics in a way that I just can't make peace with."

'We will not give up'

Luke recalled his disbelief after hearing of the Lafayette policy. "Being queer at a Catholic school is difficult, but the policy makes life worse for these kids," he said.

Not all existing U.S. diocesan documents on gender (some also address sexual orientation) offer specific directives, but most affirm their aim is to uphold church teaching. In order to do so, many documents say, schools must relate to all students and staff only on the basis of their "biological sex."

Individuals struggling with gender dysphoria are not necessarily prevented from enrolling, but they cannot use preferred names and pronouns, bathrooms and other facilities unless these correspond to the individuals' sex as assigned at birth.

Some policies, including Lafayette's, emphasize that noncompliance can impact enrollment and employment status. Lafayette calls enforcement of the policy "a

spiritual mandate."

Luke said the Lafayette policy is framed around student safety. Schools are "committed to providing a safe environment that allows students to develop and prosper," the policy begins.



Thomas Luke (Courtesy of Thomas Luke)

But Luke believes the guidance is inherently not safe.

Rates of suicidal thoughts have risen among LGBTQ youths ages 13-24 over the past three years, according to a 2022 national survey by The Trevor Project, an organization offering crisis support to LGBTQ young people. Both the survey and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data indicate transgender youths are at a greater risk of suicide. The Trevor Project additionally found that LGBTQ youths who reported their school to be LGBTQ-affirming also reported lower rates of attempting suicide.

Teachers and educators interviewed by NCR confirmed such data anecdotally.

Ish Ruiz, who has a doctorate in ethics and theology, is a postdoctoral fellow at Emory University in Atlanta, has worked with transgender youths and offers support to Catholic school educators ministering to LGBTQ young people.

"When teaching high school," said Ruiz, "I saw the statistics about transgender people become true. My trans students suffered from depression, anxiety, loneliness, suicide ideation and even suicide attempts because of the stress they felt not being welcome in their school community."

Neither Omaha's Catholic Families for Love nor We Demand More were formed to contest church teaching, said their respective members. A We Demand More petition that gained 2,300 signatures said it intended to "create an open dialogue with the diocese to amend the policy in respect for the dignity of all LGTBQ+ students."

Luke said they have "bare-minimum asks," such as ensuring there are gender-neutral bathrooms and using last names "for students who identify outside of heteronormative."

We Demand More, which comprises 100 members, sent a letter late last summer to St. Thomas More and the diocese expressing their issues with the directives. Luke said they received no direct response.

Blue Rolfes, spokesperson for the Lafayette Diocese, told NCR "the diocese has no comment" on the group.

The small group's commitment is not dampened, and Luke believes We Demand More has made an impact.

"While the school and diocese aren't directly making any changes or willing to dialogue with us, the schools are aware that if they suspend or expel a student based on this policy, they are being carefully observed," he said.

Luke is helping We Demand More transition into a social justice nonprofit with a focus on queer youth and education, but "our focus will never move away from repealing or amending the policy," he said. "We will not give up on that."

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A call for relationships, not policies

In Omaha, the first draft of a gender identity policy from Archbishop George Lucas received feedback last summer, including ample criticism, and a significantly pared-down version was shared in December. It goes into effect in the upcoming 2023-24 school year.

The original version of the policy addressed school employees and volunteers, while the latest single-page document focuses solely on students. It retains "biological sex" as the determining factor for questions of students' dress, personal pronouns, bathroom use and participation in activities.

Around 150 individuals with diverse backgrounds, including pediatricians, school leaders and "individuals with first-hand experience with gender dysphoria" contributed to the revised policy, according to the archdiocese.

Pick, who is leaving her job next year due to the policies, believes the first draft was "an extreme overstep; the finalized draft is not really better or worse."

"It's more succinct," she said.

Catholic Families for Love emerged in response to the document, and members remain distressed about its contents.



Kaela Volkmer (Courtesy of Kaela Volkmer)

Volkmer helped establish the group that now includes 700 individuals. "I think even more folks would sign on, but there's understandable fear of expulsions and firings," said the mother of three Catholic school students.

David Palmieri is a theology teacher in Massachusetts who has studied and compiled diocesan gender policies and formed a network of Catholic secondary educators dedicated to "discerning the art of accompaniment" for LGBTQ students in Catholic schools.

"That there are not more groups like these is a sign of how much fear there is, especially among people within a Catholic school community," said Palmieri, who holds a master's in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School. Speaking out publicly "comes at risk of employment, and people don't want to lose their livelihood in this battle."

New Ways Ministry, a Maryland-based group providing advocacy and support for LGBTQ Catholics, tracks how many educators and students across the country have been pushed out of schools for LGBTQ-related reasons. There are some 55 public instances of Catholic school workers being fired, forced to resign or having jobs threatened since 2007, according to the New Ways Ministry database.

"The list is far from exhaustive because many people don't want to make their case public," said executive director Francis DeBernardo.

According to Volkmer, Catholic Families for Love has sent several letters to Archbishop Lucas and to Vickie Kauffold, the Omaha archdiocesan school superintendent, expressing critiques about the policy, asking questions about the document-redevelopment process and requesting an in-person meeting.



Archbishop George Lucas of Omaha, Nebraska, concelebrates Mass at the Basilica of St. Mary Major Jan. 14, 2020, in Rome. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Volkmer said a question-and-answer document released with the updated policy answered some of their questions about its scope. But most concerns — about inadequate transparency, a lack of dialogue and the potential negative mental health impacts on young people — remain unaddressed.

"We have a common goal: We all want children safe, cared for and healthy," said Volkmer. "We have disagreements on what leads to that outcome."

Kauffold in an email told NCR the archdiocese has not met with the group "because the proper place for that conversation is in individual schools and parishes where the policy will be implemented."

Volkmer, acting as a spokesperson for Catholic Families for Love, said the questions cannot be addressed at the local level, "as the policy was a top-down directive."

"Many of us have been to our local parish and school leaders and were told that they were not involved in the policy development process and did not have any information with respect to the archdiocese's internal processes on this matter," she said. "We will continue to respectfully ask for dialogue, ask how it was developed, how it will be implemented, and how it will be evaluated in terms of its impact on our loved ones who are transgender or nonbinary."

Pick said personally and professionally she believes gender identity and sexual orientation issues "are not even on the top 10 list of what needs to be addressed in schools and churches right now."

"There are so many more important things we are called to address," she said, mentioning issues of racism and homelessness.

"Policies are happening now because of an escalating cultural narrative about an onslaught of gender ideology," said Palmieri. "That narrative is really powerful nationally right now, and as a matter of policy, dioceses want to respond to the idea."



Ish Ruiz (Courtesy of Ish Ruiz)

Ruiz said the terms "gender ideology" and "gender theory" are often used in a pejorative sense by bishops and others when attempting to describe and discredit new theories of gender at odds with "the church's own theory of gender."

The church's theory, Ruiz said, is grounded in a traditional reading of Genesis 1:27 ("male and female he created them") and "documents that have been significantly contested by many theologians and transgender Catholics." Such documents include

"Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," released in 2019 by the Vatican's Congregation (now Dicastery) for Catholic Education.

"Human sexuality is a huge mystery; we are still trying to understand it," Ruiz said. "If anything, I personally consider the magisterium's teaching on gender to be the least credible of the other theories because of its narrow focus on the complementarity of reproductive organs while ignoring pertinent new discoveries about gender identity from the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology and even neurology."

Echoing most critics of the policies, Pick said situations should be addressed on a case-by-case basis. "You rely on your relationships with families, you rely on the ability to maybe have uncomfortable conversations when a family is ready. Parents are the first teacher, and we want to support them. We can't do that in the same way with a black-and-white policy."

Pick, a convert to Catholicism, said she has heard from priests that the Omaha policy is intended to protect children from "militant LGBTQ families."

"But these families are not militant; they want equal rights and to live safely," said Pick. "In classrooms, these issues are not a talking point. Kids are in there loving each other no matter what. And when it comes down to it, they are going to continue to be the wonderful creatures they are. They will show us the faith, and they will continue to show how the Holy Spirit is moving them."

Related: New Catholic policies across US create 'culture of fear' for LGBTQ students, advocates say

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