News



On the last day of class for seniors at St. Thomas Aquinas in Dover, New Hampshire, soon-to-be graduates carry a flag in support of the school's LGBTQ community and four teachers whose contracts were not renewed. Though the Manchester Diocese and school have refuted the claim, many say the staffing decision was made because the four educators identify with or support the LGBTQ community. (NCR screenshot/Saints Shame-St. Thomas Aquinas Facebook group)



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Students beamed and parents snapped innumerable photos as the class of 2023 graduated from St. Thomas Aquinas High School May 20 in Dover, New Hampshire. But rainbow ribbons pinned on many students' gowns were a small sign of a large controversy roiling the 63-year-old Catholic school.

Four well-respected teachers — three with 20-plus years at St. Thomas — were told May 3 by the school president, Paul Marquis, that the school would not renew their contracts. Alumni, parents, teachers and students say the educators were targeted because they support or belong to the LGBTQ community.

School and diocesan leaders, including Bishop Peter Libasci of the Diocese of Manchester, New Hampshire, refute the claims.

On May 26, just before Memorial Day weekend, current St. Thomas families received emailed letters from the bishop and superintendent David Thibault that responded to claims of anti-LGBTQ actions at the school.

"Staffing decisions are hard on the entire community, but most importantly and specifically they are difficult for the individuals involved," wrote Thibault. "I understand the entire community's care and concern for them; however, I would like to reiterate that these non-renewals were not because of a teacher's LGBTQ identity or any personal alignment or views."

In his brief letter, Libasci said he echoed Thibault's points.

Liam Lena, a recent St. Thomas More High School graduate, said a meeting with school officia

Liam Lena, a recent St. Thomas Aquinas High School graduate, said a meeting with school officials and representatives from the Diocese of Manchester felt like an attempt to have students "help them push a narrative." (Courtesy of Liam Lena)

Two of the ousted teachers spoke with NCR but requested anonymity out of fear of retaliation from school administrators. Both expressed heartbreak over the situation.

"We never asked to be part of the culture wars," said one teacher. "We just wanted to keep doing our jobs."

Several families have withdrawn their children from the school in recent weeks, outraged alumni have organized to protest the decisions, and at least three other teachers have resigned.

Parents also contend school administrators and representatives from the Diocese of Manchester attempted to control public perception of the situation by meeting with student leaders May 8. According to two St. Thomas teachers, one student left the meeting in tears.

Thibault told NCR in an email the discussion with students was intended to provide support and answer questions. He also said he was unable to share details regarding the teachers' contracts out of respect for privacy and confidentiality, but made the same assertion he did in the May 26 letter — that the non-renewed contracts were not linked to LGBTQ identity or support.

"It has been disheartening to see information circulating within our community that is based on unfounded claims and further fueled by rumor and speculation," the superintendent said.

Katie Fiermonti, who said one of her sons transferred from St. Thomas last academic year due to the school's "decidedly conservative turn," called Thibault's defense "flimsy in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary."

"It's textbook gaslighting, in my opinion," she said.

> 'We never asked to be part of the culture wars. We just wanted to keep doing our jobs.'
> —Former St. Thomas Aquinas High School teacher
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To have four Catholic school teachers dismissed at the same time allegedly due to LGBTQ-related reasons would be unusual, said Robert Shine, associate director of New Ways Ministry, a Maryland-based group that advocates for LGBTQ Catholics. The organization also tracks how many students and educators have been pushed out of schools for reasons related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

There are at least 55 public instances of Catholic school workers being fired, forced to resign or having jobs threatened for LGBTQ-related reasons since 2007, according to the New Ways Ministry database.

"I don't know of any other instances where there's been a group like this that did not have their contract renewed," Shine said.

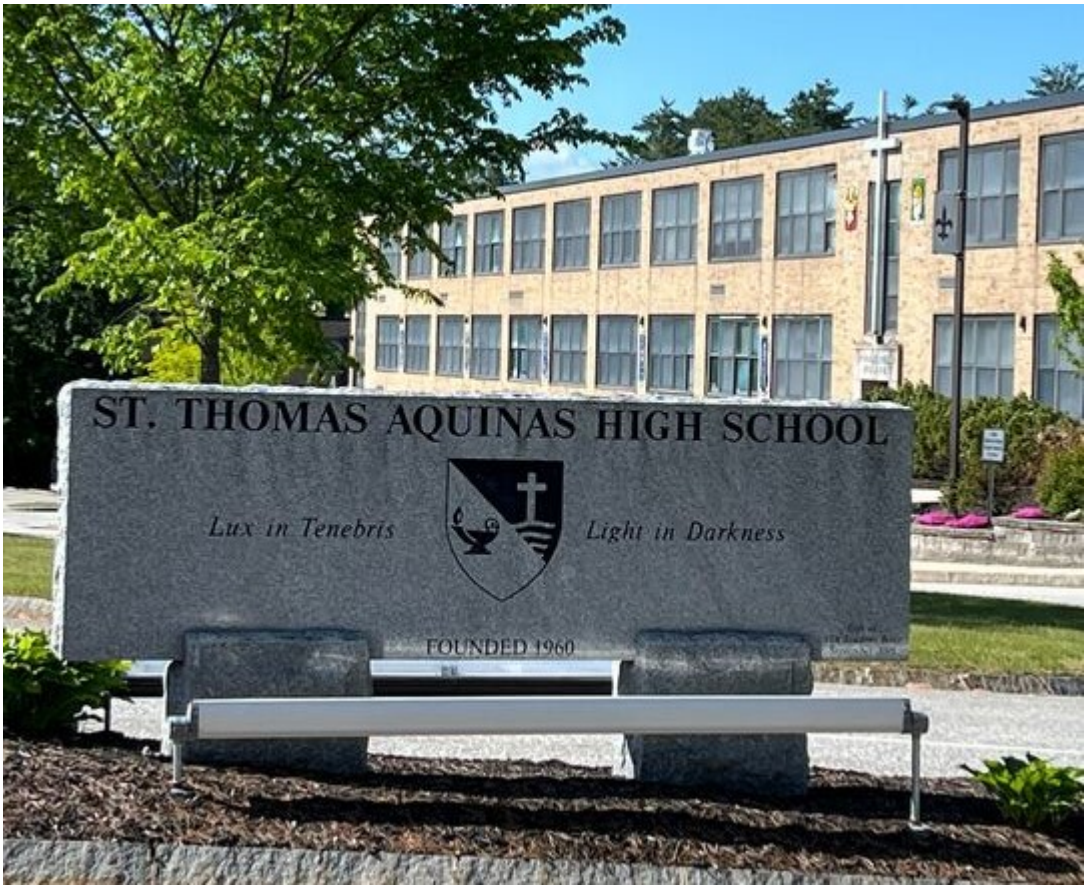
Current and former students praised the four educators who were let go: Jen Duprat, Dave Couture, Ed Tinney and Kathrine Graham.

"It was incredibly disheartening to see these teachers who have genuinely loved their students be tossed to the wayside," said Liam Lena, who graduated this month and will attend Boston College, a Jesuit school, in the fall.

Thibault, in the May 26 letter to families, wrote that "we love all our teachers."

"We entrust to them the imparting of a Catholic worldview through their actions, teaching, and non-contradictions, regardless of their own personal feelings and beliefs," he said. "This is how they support the mission of Catholic education and the mission of the Catholic Church for which we are grateful."

Many in the St. Thomas community told NCR they have observed a shift at the school (about 65 miles north of Boston) since 2020, when longtime principal Kevin Collins retired, a new administrative structure was implemented, and James Broom became chairman of the board of trustees. Under the new model, the president — most recently Marquis — reports to the board.



The community of the St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Dover, New Hampshire, is embroiled in the culture wars after four teachers' contracts were renewed. Many say the staffing decision was made because the educators identify with or support the LGBTQ community. Manchester Diocese and school officials say that's not the case. (Courtesy of Jennifer MacNeil)

'A major donor'

Collins told NCR Broom has been "a major donor" to St. Thomas over the years.

In 2017, Broom founded Hope for Tomorrow Foundation to help transform another school, St. Patrick School in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, from a struggling diocesan school into St. Patrick Academy, an independent, lay-run Catholic school.

Broom sits on several boards, including for the Avila Institute for Spiritual Formation, which was founded by Dan Burke, former head of the conservative Catholic media conglomerate EWTN. The institute, according to its website, offers content that is

"unapologetically Catholic," though it is not "an accredited institution by worldly standards."

Fergus Cullen, who describes himself as "conservative," is a former chief financial officer at St. Thomas. He worked closely with Broom on a new turf field project for the high school.

"Jim Broom and his wife are generous people," Cullen said. "But there's no question that he was part of this cultural change, and it was intended to double down on a certain brand of Catholicism," one that has a "narrow view of who is welcome."

Broom did not respond to several requests for comment.



Recent cultural changes at the school meant Willow MacNeil, who is transgender and graduated in 2022, "needed to stay out of the limelight," said her mother, Jennifer MacNeil. "It was head down and get out." (Courtesy of Jennifer MacNeil)

Jennifer MacNeil's transgender daughter, Willow, graduated from St. Thomas in 2022 after four years at the school. MacNeil said Willow deeply felt the changes.

"All the little graces had gone away, and with it was a clear message that, 'You are not welcome, you are deviant, and you are wrong,' " MacNeil said. "And that's not what we believe as Catholics."

MacNeil said she and her husband recognized when Willow was very young that she might have "a gender identity not aligned with the gender assigned at birth."

Before enrolling Willow at St. Thomas, MacNeil spoke to Collins, then principal. "He told us our child would be welcome, and we felt there was a balance there. She was still questioning, but I knew it allowed her time and safety, compassion and love."

"We were aware that the church institution requires certain things," and Willow followed the male dress code, MacNeil said. But some teachers called Willow by her chosen name and pronouns, and overall. she felt supported by those teachers, she said.

Those who helped Willow feel safe at the school, she added, were among the teachers whose contracts were not renewed.



Kevin Collins, previous St. Thomas Aquinas principal, said he tried to balance a pastoral approach with church teaching on gender identity and sexuality. (Courtesy of Kevin Collins)

In an interview with NCR, Collins said he attempted to balance a pastoral approach with church teaching on gender identity and sexuality, but that he didn't feel pressured by the current "push by the diocese" to address concerns about gender identity.

That changed after Collins retired and the new administrative structure was announced, MacNeil said.

"It changed profoundly under the influence of James Broom," she said. "Willow understood she needed to stay out of the limelight. It was head down and get out."

In the May 26 letter, Thibault said that if a member of the school community "asserts a specific sexual identity or an identity that does not match his or her biological sex, we will continue to minister to and accompany those individuals as we always have."

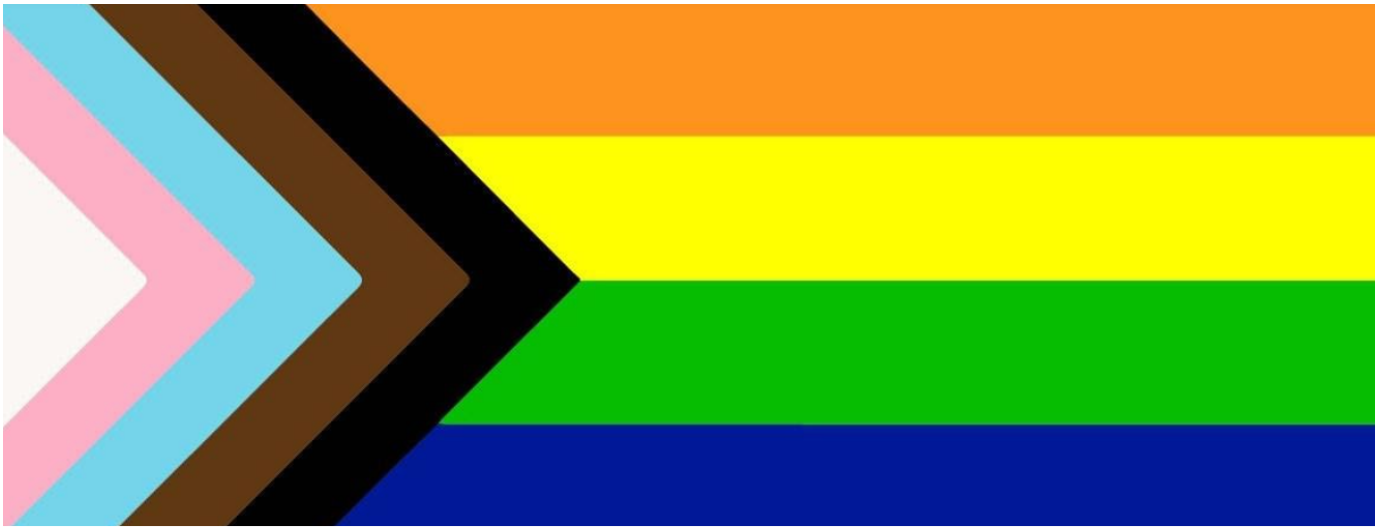
A broader cultural shift

A number of incidents this past academic year at St. Thomas illustrate the cultural shift that preceded the faculty decisions, according to parents and staff.

English teachers typically study a book over the summer, and last year they read Jesuit Fr. James Martin's *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*.

Inspired by the reading, one teacher began the year asking students for their pronouns. Soon after, Marquis, school president, sent an email to parents apologizing.

"At St. Thomas Aquinas, our Catholic mission does not bend or bow to evolving attitudes, trends, or norms," reads the emailed letter, which was obtained by NCR.



Alumni, parents and other members of the St. Thomas Aquinas community formed a Facebook group to organize their response to the recent events at the New Hampshire high school. A change.org petition had garnered more than 1,500 signatures by May 27. (NCR screenshot/Saints Shame-St. Thomas Aquinas Facebook group)

"It is not our policy to ask any student to identify him/herself by gender," Marquis wrote. "I am truly sorry for any discomfort our students may have experienced due to a deviation from this policy."

He wrote that the situation "arose from a well-meaning professional's attempt to create a welcoming environment." But, he added, "it was misguided."

After a theology teacher told students that God transcends gender, Marquis called members of the theology department into his office and told them they were to refer to God always as "Father" and "He" — never "She." Marquis' directive was confirmed by three teachers.

"God transcends the human distinction between the sexes, " reads the Catechism of the Catholic Church. God "is neither man nor woman."

This spring, Marquis directed students to remove the word "gay" from a song in the school's spring production of "Legally Blonde."

Multiple teachers also said they were told they would participate in training with the Person and Identity Project during the coming school year. They said Thibault, the diocesan superintendent, came to the school last fall unannounced and spoke nearly an hour about "gender ideology" and the virtues of the project.

The Person and Identity Project is an initiative of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank based in Washington, D.C. Its stated aim is to assist the Catholic Church "in promoting the Catholic vision of the human person and responding to the challenges of gender ideology," which it describes as an "erroneous system of beliefs" about the human person.

A mental health expert previously told NCR some of the initiative's content is medically questionable. Its website contains information from the American College

of Pediatricians, a non-mainstream medical organization labeled a "hate group" by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Related: An inside look at how the Boston Archdiocese is crafting gender-identity guidelines

Superintendent Thibault, however, told NCR the school is not using the project as training or a curriculum. He said it is one of many resources the diocese offers, including Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation on family life, Amoris Laetitia, and his 2015 encyclical, Laudato Si'.

NCR obtained copies of two letters from Marquis, informing two teachers their contracts would not be renewed. The letters, which are identical, give no reason for the termination. They conclude: "Please be assured of my prayers and my best wishes for you in your future endeavors."

Students react

As word got out, students voiced their frustration with the administration and support for the affected teachers, posting flyers that read: "We love you for who you are / We thank you so much for your commitment to us."

On the class of 2024's Instagram page, students shared a message to the four educators.

"We feel helpless," it reads. "We feel disappointed. But above all, we feel a need for justice. Though we are still processing and developing a plan of action, we wanted to reach out to tell you that we will not let this go."

Staff removed the signs, and on May 8, juniors and seniors on the student advisory board were pulled out of class without notice and told to leave their phones in a locked room, said Liam Lena. He recounted the events based on a summary he'd written up with fellow seniors the night after the meeting, "to assure that we couldn't be told that we remembered events incorrectly."

Students met with Marquis, along with the school's director of counseling, the communications director for the Manchester Diocese, and the diocesan director of marketing, enrollment and development.

"Thibault told NCR the groups "engaged in a dialogue about why the school is unable to discuss personal employment decisions, answered questions as to what staffing may look like next year, and why it was important to come together as a community."

Marquis "claimed that none of the staffing decisions were made on the basis of LGBTQ support or alignment," according to the students' summary shared with NCR. And he "told us that we as student leaders needed to go and spread the message that the 'rumors' of the teachers being fired for their support were untrue."

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Rita Lena, Liam's mother, said she was "completely taken aback that this meeting happened."

Among the many "problematic" elements of the meeting was "the fact that when they didn't get what they wanted, they tried to put the responsibility on the students," said Lena, adding that Liam was "very upset, almost traumatized when he came home that day."

"If you can't be transparent with 'supporting students,' there is a problem," she said.

Several older alumni told NCR they've drawn on the Catholic social teaching and ethics they learned at St. Thomas Aquinas as they have organized, contested the recent staffing changes and requested a third-party review of the recent employment decisions.

"We were taught to think critically, study hard, get involved in sports and extracurriculars, and to love each other," said Justin Pike, a 1999 graduate who has helped organize the alumni's response. "There's been a seismic shift from what was before."

A change.org petition decrying the administration's actions had gained nearly 1,600 signatures by May 27, and a Facebook group was 883 members strong.

MacNeil said families have a right to send their children to a school that aligns with their beliefs. "If the school let go of the teachers for the reasons alleged, the school should own it, the diocese should own it," she said.

"Parents should know if St. Thomas Aquinas no longer fits with their faith and their values, so they can make an informed choice about where they send their children."

A version of this story appeared in the **June 9-22, 2023** print issue under the headline: Removal of 4 teachers at Catholic school in New Hampshire ignites culture war.