News



by Katie Collins Scott

Former Staff Reporter

View Author Profile
kcscott@ncronline.org

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Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, has closed his archdiocesan Department of Catholic Schools amid backlash over a new gender identity document for students. The unexpected move appears to indicate that nearly all oversight of Catholic schools across Western Oregon will now be done instead by other chancery staff and parish priests.

The measure has triggered speculation and confusion, while also rattling many members of the Catholic school community who already were distressed following the release of the gender-identity guidelines in January.

Charlene Hannibal, a parent of students at All Saints School in Portland, called the decision "alarming and strange."

"It seems combative and confusing, and with so little communication around this and the gender document, it leaves people with fears and not knowing what's true and what's not," she told NCR.



Charlene Hannibal (Courtesy of Charlene Hannibal)

A notice posted on the archdiocese's website says the Catholic schools department — providing support to more than 15,000 students and 1,300 educators and school staff — is temporarily closed "as we work to reevaluate how best to integrate schools more fully into our mission."

"Our Catholic schools are an essential part of our mission of evangelization," reads the notice. "They serve a vital role in teaching, witnessing to, and spreading the Gospel. We have seen great changes in the environment in which our schools operate, but the importance of the mission and our dedication to our families is

unchanging."

A senior leader in the archdiocese who asked not to be named for fear of retribution told NCR that, beyond the office being closed, the positions of superintendent and associate superintendent were both eliminated. That leader said diocesan school pastors are now being charged with overseeing their schools.

Pastors with parish schools were told of the department's closure June 22, and at least two priests shared the news with their respective communities almost immediately. Those priests said pastoral center staff would coordinate some of the services of the now-closed school department.

Archdiocesan communications staff did not immediately respond to NCR's questions.

Sample's surprise action takes place as hundreds of parents and educators in the archdiocese are expressing distress about his new guidelines.

"A Catholic Response to Gender Identity Theory" was released Jan. 25, and — like many such guidelines and policies emerging in dioceses nationwide — states all young people must use names, pronouns, bathrooms and attire that correspond to their sex assigned at birth.

The document covers youths 18 and under in Catholic schools and in religious education and youth ministry programs. It is described as a "preliminary guidance," and several parents and educators told NCR they suspect it will become a mandate this school year.

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Archdiocesan staff have not yet responded to NCR's questions about a possible mandate.

Since the document's release, at least two administrators have resigned in protest, several teachers have opted not to renew contracts and many families have withdrawn students.

Additionally more than 1,000 parents and educators, representing nearly 50 schools and Catholic entities in the archdiocese, signed a petition expressing their distress about the document and its impact on the LGBTQ community.

On Wednesday, June 21, a letter with contents from the petition was delivered to the pastoral center. The following day, Sample informed pastors he had closed the schools department.

Tim Uhl previously served as a lay consultant to the U.S. bishops' education committee and currently is superintendent of Catholic schools for the Diocese of Buffalo, New York. He called the closure "very drastic and unusual" and said he knows of only two other U.S. dioceses that have had similar closures, and both instances were tied to bankruptcies. "This is a much different situation," said Uhl.

Closing the department at the start of the summer likely will leave parents, educators and administrators feeling confused and worried about the upcoming school year, he added. "The timing seems inconsiderate and unprofessional, and then to presumably take people who've given their time and heart and soul to this work and send them packing — well, it's really hard to fathom."

The archdiocese did not immediately respond to a query about how educators and parents were informed of the changes in school leadership.

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>
> —Charlene Hannibal
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In a 2019 profile published in the Catholic Sentinel (the 153-year-old archdiocesan newspaper closed by Sample last fall), superintendent Jeannie Ray-Timoney said Catholic schools have the opportunity to solidify people's faith and bring others home to the Catholic Church. "If people are questioning their faith, the community can help them revisit their beliefs," she told the Sentinel. "The sense of community and welcome they feel can draw them back."

**Shutdown comes amid backlash**

In an interview with The Catholic World Report about a month after issuing the gender-identity document, Sample said reactions had been "largely positive" in the

Portland Archdiocese.

"Many people, especially parents, have thanked me for releasing a clear teaching document," he said.

"The church is strong here and we have many faithful Catholics, but we live in the Pacific Northwest, which has a very secular culture, which has embraced gender ideology theory," added the archbishop. "So, I've received some pushback or disagreement, but nothing that causes me any grave concerns."

The recent petition signed by 1,000 people, however, may indicate the pushback is sizable and organized.

"Many faithful Catholics," says the petition, are "profoundly concerned about the consequences" of the document because it "ignores commonly accepted best practices in education, medicine, psychology, and child development, and has the potential to cause grave harm to an already vulnerable population."

The guidelines were released quietly, the petition continues, and school communities were not given the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the archdiocese about its contents or express their opinions on it before it was presented to them.

Grassroots groups in Omaha, Nebraska, and Lafayette, Louisiana, raised similar critiques last year over the content of gender-identity documents in their areas as well as about the drafting process. So far, their respective bishops have not agreed to meet with the groups.



Anna Hope-Melnick and one of her three children, Eliza, share a selfie. Eliza, who just completed second grade at a Portland, Oregon, archdiocesan school, identifies as nonbinary. (Courtesy of Anna Hope-Melnick)

"What's happening in Portland and more nationally is a real apostolic crisis — firings, reprimands, public feuds," said David Palmieri, a Massachusetts theology teacher who has studied diocesan gender policies nationwide and founded a network to aid educators supporting LGBTQ students. "I'm getting messages every week from diocesan, school and parish leaders asking for help. There is so much concern, even up to the highest levels."

Portland archdiocesan schools have adopted or ignored the guidelines to varying degrees. At least two religious order schools did not change how they interacted with transgender or nonbinary students during the remainder of the academic year, according to educators and parents speaking on the condition of anonymity because of fear of retaliation from the archdiocese.

At one diocesan school, a strict implementation of the guidelines "decimated our beautiful community," according to a teacher who said he was asked to verbally pledge to abide by the document. The individual told NCR that when they refused, they were told their contract would be rescinded.

The pastor at the Madeleine Parish in Portland, Fr. Mike Biewend, praised the school's principal, whom he said is leaving due to moral opposition to the guidelines.

Principal Carol Glasgow is a "living example of what it means to live by one's conscience," said the priest in his homily for the school's eighth-grade graduation Mass.

Glasgow has given up "her paycheck and career" because she cannot "in good conscience support what the archbishop is asking her, as a leader, to do," Biewend said. For her, the document does not "affirm the preciousness of every child."

Hannibal, from All Saints, said the gender-identity document "was completely heartbreaking to read," while Anna Hope-Melnick, the mother of a nonbinary child at a Catholic school, said she felt panic after learning its contents.

Hope-Melnick said years ago her child experienced night terrors and panic attacks before sharing with family they were nonbinary. The student has been attending a Catholic school where the community has been "shockingly wonderful," even after the guidelines were announced, she said. But if they become a mandate for all schools, "my kid could not be themselves; we would have to leave," said Hope-Melnick.

**'A keen interest in Catholic education'**

Several members of the Catholic school community told NCR they believe the archbishop's vision for schools in the region is currently underway at a suburban Portland grade school — Christ the King in Milwaukie.




In a video posted on the parish website, Msgr. John Cihak, pastor of Christ the King School in Milwaukie, Oregon, announces alongside Principal Sarah Taber that Archbishop Alexander Sample has asked the school to become the first in the state to affiliate with the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Monsignor John Cihak)

In a video posted on the Christ the King website about a month ago, the pastor, Msgr. John Cihak (a former papal master of ceremonies for Popes Benedict XVI and Francis), shares an announcement alongside the school principal, Sarah Taber. He says Sample has asked the school to become the first in the state to affiliate with the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education.

According to the institute's website, the California-based nonprofit helps schools embrace the classical tradition of liberal education and preserve and renew "our treasured Catholic K-12 school system which is ever more vital in an increasingly 'post-Christian' culture."

Catholic Vote featured a story on the institute in February titled "Catholic Teaching Program Provides Alternative to Woke Licensing Requirements."

"The archbishop," says Cihak in the video, "has asked us to do this, to be the first but not the only" school affiliated with the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education. "Sarah and I are going to be talking to the school pastors very soon, because

[Sample] wants more parish schools to be moving into this model."

The archbishop has "a keen interest in Catholic education," Cihak adds. "He wants our Catholic schools to thrive and to thrive as truly Catholic institutions."

A version of this story appeared in the **July 7-20, 2023** print issue under the headline: Portland archbishop closes schools office amid gender document backlash.