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Archbishop: Staffer's departure over marriage follows church teaching

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Seattle

Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain said a local Catholic school's requirement that the vice principal quit after it learned of his same-sex marriage was not discriminatory but held to church teaching and the school's Catholic mission.

According to a statement from Eastside Catholic School in the Seattle suburb of Sammamish, Vice Principal Mark Zmuda resigned in mid-December during a meeting with school officials "for violating his signed agreement to abide by Catholic Church teachings."

In the weeks since his departure, Eastside Catholic students have staged a sit-in protest [1] and launched a petition not only in support of Zmuda, asking for his reinstatement, but in an effort "to change the Catholic Church's opposition (to) gay marriage." As of Friday, the petition had more than 33,000 signatures of people around the country.

Sartain said in his statement Wednesday that he had received a copy of the petition that morning.

"Leaders of Catholic schools are charged with the responsibility of both imparting and modeling" the Catholic church's teaching, he said, adding that the decision by the board and administrators of Eastside, an independent Catholic school, asking Zmuda to resign "was made after a great deal of prayer and consultation."

"In no way was their goal to be discriminatory to anyone but to be faithful to their mission as a Catholic school," the archbishop said. "The archdiocese supports their decision. The decision has been misunderstood and mischaracterized by some, and we now have an opportunity to help our students learn even more about Catholic teaching."

A statement from the school, released in January, said all school employees are required to sign an agreement in the employee handbook stating that "the public behaviors of our faculty and staff must at all times be consistent with the values and teachings of the Catholic Church."

The school added that the Catholic church opposes same-sex marriage. The church teaches that marriage is between one man and one woman and sex outside marriage is a sin.

It also noted that when Zmuda "married his same-sex partner, the school administration was left with no acceptable alternative that would allow him to remain eligible for employment at Eastside Catholic School" and the school's president and CEO, Sr. Mary Tracy, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, "had no choice other than to discuss resignation."

The school's statement acknowledged that students have expressed their views regarding Zmuda's dismissal.

"We are proud of our students. Throughout this challenging time, they have been respectful and thoughtful in asking questions and we will continue to offer ways to help our students work through this issue, understand Catholic teaching and to express their thoughts in a manner that allows (Eastside Catholic) to effectively fulfill its educational mission as a Catholic school," it said. "Administrators at the school have met with students, both individually and in small groups, listening to their concerns and opinions regarding this situation."

In a similar situation in the diocese of Toledo, Ohio, the band and choir director of Sandusky Central Catholic School, Brian Panetta, was asked to resign in mid-January after announcing his plans to marry his same-sex partner next year.

According to local news reports, he was initially fired, but then advised to resign.

A Jan. 13 statement from the Toledo diocese said the diocese supported the school's decision because it reflected the terms of the school's contract with its teachers.

It noted that "in light of the church's clear teaching on sacred marriage" and because the teacher had "publicly indicated his marriage plans are contrary to church teachings," the school leadership "properly determined that his employment could not continue."

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