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Push to protect teachers from religious discrimination



Nathan Zamprogno at his home at Oakville, northwest Sydney. He was sacked from a religious school after he was confronted about being gay. Picture: John Feder

EXCLUSIVE

By **NATASHA BITA**

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Religious schools have sacked, demoted or transferred teachers for being gay, using IVF, divorcing or having sex while single, a teachers' union has warned.

Liberal Party Senator Andrew Bragg is demanding the federal government amend its Religious Discrimination Bill to protect teachers, as well as students, from discrimination on the grounds of sexuality.

"A large number of teachers have been sacked just for being gay," he told *The Australian* on Thursday.

"Teachers wouldn't be sacked for being black, but they're sacked for being gay – I think that's wrong and it's something I want to fix."

The Independent Education Union, representing 75,000 private school teachers, is lobbying the Morrison government to include them in its legislation to shield gay students from school expulsion.

It has detailed how a divorced female Catholic school teacher was given a formal warning and demotion after a male colleague's car was seen outside her house.

Another teacher was sacked for "falling pregnant out of wedlock", and settled out of court for 14 weeks' pay in lieu of paid parental leave, the AIEU has told senators inquiring into the

Religious Discrimination Bill.

A Catholic school principal told a married teacher who fell pregnant using IVF, after a two-year fertility struggle, that her child had been “conceived in sin”, and asked her to resign, the union states in a submission to the Senate inquiry.

And a regional Catholic diocese executive director told an assistant principal he was “not in a genuine Catholic marriage” because his wife’s first marriage had not been annulled.

National Catholic Education Commission executive director Jacinta Collins said religious schools should be able to “preference the employment of staff who share our faith or are willing to support the ethos and mission of the school”.

She downplayed the union’s case studies as “anecdotal cases that are impossible to prove”.

“Occasionally you’ll get a case that’s poorly managed,” she told *The Australian*.

“We have 100,000 staff across Australia, and we don’t expect them to conform absolutely to Catholic teaching.

“Life is messy and there’s an acceptance of that. I was a single mother and now I’m one of the senior lay leaders in the church.

“All we ask of our staff is that they operate consistently with our religious ethos.

“Catholic social teaching is what parents have chosen for their children, and that’s what we deliver.”

But the IEU acting deputy secretary of the NSW/ACT branch, Pam Smith, said she had personally intervened in cases of teachers being sacked or “pushed out” on the grounds of their homosexual or marital status.

She said the case studies were all real, but teachers did not want to be identified for fear of

losing work in other schools.

“One teacher was a co-ordinator at a Catholic school, with 10 years’ experience, and she was dobbled in by a parent who saw her walking in a shopping centre with her long-term (female) partner and child,” Ms Smith said.

“She was called in and told that a complaint had gone to the bishop, so you’ll lose your leadership position.

“She left the Catholic sector, and it was a great loss to the school.”

Former Christian high school English teacher Nathan Zamprogno, now a Hawkesbury City Councillor and policy adviser to NSW Liberal MP Robyn Preston, said he was “gutted” after the school sacked him for being gay.

He said he had spoken at a staff meeting about the need to safeguard the mental health of LGBTI+ students during the same-sex marriage debate in 2017.

“I wasn’t trying to be provocative,” he said.

“One of our senior students who was beginning to transition became so mentally unwell that he dropped out of his HSC year, and it broke my heart so I decided to give a talk about how the school could better look after its same-sex students.”

Councillor Zamprogno said the principal called him into his office and said: “Nathan, I have no idea why you would present on that topic. Are you gay?”

“I said ‘yes’ for the first time in my life,” Councillor Zamprogno said.

“I had been incredibly private about it beforehand – it was nobody’s business and it had nothing to do with my ability to do my job or uphold the ethos of the school.

“This is deeply traumatic to me because I was not ‘out’ before this ... I didn’t wave the flag.”

Mr Zamprogno said the Pentecostal school told him it would not employ him the following year – ending his 20-year teaching career.

He said the school principal, who he cannot identify due to a “non-disparagement” clause in his termination agreement, had previously remarked that he would never employ a gay teacher.

“I would shrink in the corner and a part of me would die inside,” he said.

“I know many, many observant, sincere Christians who are also gay, but there’s this whole implication that if you’re gay you can’t be a good Christian.

“I’ve lost my faith over this – I’ve seen enough sanctimony and cant to last a lifetime.”

University of Tasmania research fellow Dr Bronwyn Fielder, who is collaborating with the University of Sydney on research into LGBTI teacher discrimination, said she had interviewed dozens of teachers who had been sacked or asked to resign from religious schools over their sexuality.

Dr Fielder said the Uniting Church was making “a big effort to be more inclusive”, with some schools celebrating teachers who come out as gay.

“In the Catholic Church, you often find the principals are supportive but you’re always at the mercy of who’s in charge,” she said.

“It depends a lot on the Archbishops and their mindset.

“There’s a lot of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’.

“People have had very traumatic experiences, particularly when they’re very religious and told they’re not welcome anymore – their values are the same but they happen to be gay or lesbian.”

The Religious Discrimination Bill is unlikely to be put to the Senate before the next federal election, after Coalition MPs crossed the floor to vote with Labor on amendments [protecting students but not teachers](#).

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