



The varsity football team of Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in Indianapolis at an Aug. 16 game (Michael Hoffbauer Photography)



by Catherine M. Odell

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Indianapolis — August 27, 2019

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Catholic high school students, teachers and staff returned to school here amid a quiet tension mixed with the usual back-to-school chatter and excitement.

Over the summer, Archbishop Charles Thompson forced the firing of Joshua Payne-Elliott, for 13 years a teacher at [Cathedral High School](#), who was discovered to be in a same-sex marriage. Across town, [Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School](#), another one of the city's seven Catholic high schools, refused to terminate Layton Payne-Elliott, a math teacher and the husband of Cathedral's fired teacher.

When Brebeuf's School Board announced that it would be unjust and a violation of conscience to terminate Layton Payne-Elliott, Thompson [announced](#) that it could no longer be called a Catholic school. By mid-August, the bishop told Brebeuf that it could not open its 2019-20 school year with an all-school Mass, though he permitted daily 7:45 a.m. Masses to continue in the school's chapel.

The archdiocese drove home its point as schools prepared to open. Thompson ordered Catholic school teachers and counselors to sign a contract agreeing that they would be "witnesses of Catholic principles in word and deed."

In an Aug. 21 [response](#) to a suit filed by Joshua Payne-Elliott, claiming he was the victim of unlawful discrimination, the archdiocese stated its case:

When a teacher at Cathedral publicly entered a same-sex marriage in violation of his contract and of Catholic teaching, the Archdiocese spent almost two years in dialogue with Cathedral to discern the most appropriate pastoral response. The Archdiocese eventually informed Cathedral that if it wished to remain affiliated with the Catholic Church, it could not continue employing a teacher who lived in open violation of Catholic teaching. Desiring to remain a part of the Catholic Church, Cathedral ended its employment relationship with Mr. Payne-Elliott.

Throughout the hot summer months, the Catholic community in Indianapolis simmered with passionate reactions.

At Cathedral on Aug. 8 — the first day of classes — rainbow-colored streamers were hanging from trees lining the drive up the hill to the school's main entrance. For many years, seniors traditionally lobbed rolls of toilet paper at underclassman as

they arrived to start the school year. This year's rainbow streamers, mixed with toilet paper streamers, communicated disapproval of the firing on the part of some students and their families.

A Cathedral High School video shows scenes of the first day of school Aug. 8. (YouTube)

Earlier in the summer, Cathedral students and parents had organized a prayer circle and protest in front of archdiocesan offices.

On June 24, more than 100 parents of current and former Brebeuf students gathered at the school to find out what it would mean to have their school's "Catholic" identity revoked. The school's principal, Greg VanSlambrook, reassured parents. "All of our programming will remain unchanged," he said. "There are some things we're going to miss, but it's not things that students and families will notice."

Brebeuf's administration will no longer be involved in archdiocesan discussions about issues affecting schools. Neither the archbishop nor other diocesan officials will be attending Brebeuf school events like graduation.

Weeks after the archbishop's decree, Brebeuf [announced](#) that Jesuit Fr. Brian Paulson, provincial of the Jesuit's Midwest Province, would direct an appeal of Thompson's decree to the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome. Brebeuf hoped that the effects of the decree could be suspended during the appeal process, with the larger hope that the decree removing Catholic identification from the 57-year-old school with a co-ed enrollment of about 800 would be overruled.

In early August, it appeared as though Brebeuf's athletic teams might be selectively banned or limited from participating in sports events with other Catholic schools.

On Aug. 5, Brebeuf's girls' golf team was excluded from the Guerin Catholic Invitational at Guerin High School in nearby Noblesville, Indiana. Though Guerin High School belongs to the adjacent Diocese of Lafayette, Guerin's athletic director, Ryan Davis, decided to discuss Brebeuf's situation with other Indianapolis Catholic high schools who were participating in the event, Bishop Chatard, Cardinal Ritter, Cathedral and Roncalli.

Davis said that the consensus was that it would be best to leave Brebeuf girls out of the Catholic golf invitational. Brebeuf's cross-country teams have also been excluded from the Sept. 14 all-Catholic cross-country meet.

Advertisement

Brebeuf's athletic director, Ted Hampton, expressed disappointment that Brebeuf athletes were denied the chance to compete on Aug. 5 but declined to make any further comments.

Mike Higginbotham, Brebeuf's director of marketing and communication, reinforced Hampton's reluctance to speculate about what limitations and exclusions Brebeuf's athletic teams might face in this school year. As Higginbotham stated in an e-mail to NCR, "I wanted to let you know that while we are in the canonical appeal process, we are not making substantive comments and I am asking the members of our faculty and staff to do the same."

But as Brebeuf's administrators, teachers and coaches declined to comment, Brebeuf's [athletics website](#) suggests a full schedule of events for its student athletes. This year's varsity football schedule included an Aug. 23 matchup against Bishop Chatard and games later in the season against Ritter, Roncalli and Cathedral.

The boys' varsity track and field schedule, on the other hand, included weekly meets but did not include the all-Catholic cross-country meet scheduled for Sept. 14 at Guerin High School.

On Aug. 13, Brebeuf named Layton Payne-Elliott as its head Boys Track and Field coach. Payne-Elliott had served as the team's assistant coach for 15 years.

During this school year, he will also serve as something much larger. He remains the symbolic face for a Brebeuf community of students, families, teachers, administration and alumni — a community that is asking Rome to recognize that it hasn't stopped being Catholic.

[Catherine M. Odell is a freelance writer and editor and the author of 14 books, including one co-authored with Margaret Savitskas, *Angels of the Lord: 365 Reflections on Our Heavenly Guardians* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2016).]