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Headmaster of Episcopal School of Dallas says he wants to keep job

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Published: 22 September 2011 10:42 PM

Updated: 22 September 2011 11:38 PM

The Rev. Stephen Swann said Thursday that he hopes to keep his job as headmaster at the Episcopal School of Dallas, which lost a multimillion-dollar lawsuit largely because of his decision to force a student to leave in the wake of her sexual relationship with a teacher.

“ESD is my life,” the 66-year-old priest said one day after a jury found the school grossly negligent, largely for forcing the student to withdraw.

Swann founded the school with a handful of students in 1974. He and the school’s board president, John Eagle, met Thursday with the *The Dallas Morning News* editorial board.

Swann said he has received more than a hundred supportive letters, emails and phone calls

since the school lost the lawsuit, which will be appealed. “When you’ve been around a long time, you have a group of people who believe in your institution,” Swann said.

In court Wednesday, Charla Aldous, lead attorney for the family, said Swann and two other administrators at the private school should be replaced to show that the school learned from mistakes in handling the aftermath of the sexual relationship.

The jury awarded the family \$6 million to \$9 million, depending on the interpretation of damages, mainly for the school’s decision to force the girl to withdraw after her relationship with teacher Nathan Campbell came to light.

Campbell, 34 at the time of the relationship with the student, who was 16, has acknowledged it and faces criminal charges in the case. Her name is not being published because *The Dallas Morning News* does not generally identify victims of sex crimes.

The relationship was discovered in late 2009. School officials said they decided the girl should leave the school two months later because she kept speaking openly about it and they felt the school was no longer a healthy place for her. The lawsuit was filed several months later.

The full impact of the episode and the grueling eight weeks of testimony in the civil trial that ended Wednesday won’t be known for years, but observers say for the school, a lot depends on how officials respond in the next few months.

“They are going to have to start at the beginning on rebuilding their reputation,” said Karen Kleinz, associate director of the National School Public Relations Association.

Kleinz said in an interview that she is not familiar with the ESD incident but has worked with other schools in similar situations. The school “needs to begin to look at all of its policies and be very transparent,” she said.

‘Positive impact’ of trial

Eagle told the editorial board that he thought in the long run, the aftermath of the relationship and the trial will “have a positive impact.”

“Nobody likes these things, but they give you an opportunity to reflect,” he said.

Some reforms at the school were implemented during the trial, Eagle said. Among them: The school expanded its email server to retain years’ worth of emails, did away with school cellphones for employees, installed GPS tracking on school vehicles and instituted new controls on school credit cards.

When asked about whether there might be changes in top personnel at the school, Eagle said that he plans to meet with fellow school board members next week and that nothing is off the table.

But “one of the things that we were accused of in this trial is that we made a fast decision,” he said. “And now we’re being asked to make a fast decision. And that’s just not fair.”

“We can’t sit here and weigh 37 years in 15 minutes. We’re going to go back and make a very deliberate process.”

Eagle didn’t rule out his own removal. He played a part in many of the decisions related to the

lawsuit.

Eagle said he feels the school didn't get a fair trial. He also said the school offered the family a \$1.5 million settlement before the trial.

Testimony has also shown that the school offered to provide housing for the family in a different community where the girl could attend school, and even to provide her with a car.

ESD's image

Eagle said he does not believe the school has an image problem within its own community. "You're going to find the vast majority of people back that school," Eagle said.

"Everybody is sad that this happened. You don't want this on anybody's school, let alone your own," he said.

Ashley Parks is one of those believers. The 1994 alum and parent of a student at the school said in an interview that she was not looking for Swann to step down and neither are other parents she knows. "I've known Father Swann for decades. He's a caring man," Parks said.

ESD is "a tight-knit community," said Parks. "And I will tell you I was more proud to drop my daughter off there this morning than any other day."

Dr. Ian Rule, a private school consultant in Dallas, said in an interview that the publicity from the case might hurt the school in some circles but he hasn't heard much talk about it.

From what he read about the decision to have the student leave the school, "it probably was

best for the young lady to be someplace else — how that came about was the problem.”

Rule said some damaging emails and memos sent from top administrators made it seem “like they need to put a zipper on their mouth and they made some bad decisions as to how to express themselves.”

But he said he hasn’t changed his mind about the school’s reputation. “As long as Steve Swann is running the place, I will be comfortable in recommending it,” he said.

Terry Flowers, executive director of the St. Philip’s School and Community Center in South Dallas, testified in support of Swann and his school on the final day of the trial.

On Thursday, he pledged continued support and said he had no qualms about sending his students on to ESD.

“The reputation of Steve Swann and the Episcopal School of Dallas will sustain itself,” Flowers said. “He has impeccable integrity and what he has accomplished in the lives of so many will far outweigh the negative light that has been placed on them over the last few months.”

More signs that the ESD community is rallying around the institution popped up on campus Thursday — literally. Posters with sayings such as “We are ESD” and “This is our house” decorated buildings inside and out.

“People had been brainstorming different ideas of what would be a good way to boost up school spirit and increase the unity,” said Devi Nair, president of the student council.

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