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SOUTH JERSEY

Joseph DeShan, Cinnaminson teacher who fathered teen's child as priest, loses certificates



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TRENTON — A state board has revoked the certificates of a former Cinnaminson teacher who fathered a child with a minor while serving in the priesthood.

Joseph DeShan survived a tenure challenge by Cinnaminson's school board in 2018 that cited his relationship with the girl, who in 1990 gave birth days after her 16th birthday, as well as a more recent remark to a township student about her "pretty green eyes."

But the State Board of Examiners, alerted to the tenure action, decided to pursue a separate action — the suspension or revocation of DeShan's certificates.

During the ensuing legal fight, a state judge sharply criticized seven Cinnaminson teachers and a district retiree who served as DeShan's character witnesses.

Judge blasts DeShan character witnesses

“It was obvious that none had concerns about these incidents or the safety and well-being of any of the children in the school district,” Administrative Law Judge Dean Buono asserted in an October 2023 ruling.

Buono said the teachers “had questionable understanding and interpretations of DeShan’s inappropriate sexual relationship with a minor.”

Washington Township man charged [Haddon Heights teacher faces child-pornography accusations](#)

Some said they had not known DeShan’s sexual partner in Connecticut was a juvenile, but added that did not affect their support for him as an educator.

The judge also noted all of the witnesses “testified that the ‘pretty green eyes’ comment was acceptable despite the fact that it had made the student uncomfortable.”

In that 2015 incident, DeShan told a student in class, “Look at me. Let me see your pretty, green eyes. You don’t see them too much anymore.”

Teachers testifying on DeShan's behalf said comments on a student’s appearance could help to build a rapport.

DeShan was longtime Cinnaminson teacher

DeShan taught for more than 20 years at Cinnaminson Middle School and Rush Elementary School, according to the tenure charges.

The sexual relationship with a 14-year-old began in 1988 when DeShan was a seminarian in his 30s and the girl worked at a rectory in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the ruling said.

According to the decision, DeShan requested a leave from the priesthood in 1989 after turning 40, and the relationship continued until 1993.

The young mother, identified as A.J., at one point moved to Moorestown, where she lived for a year with DeShan and his family.

She returned to Connecticut in 1991 after becoming “homesick,” according to DeShan’s testimony at a hearing before Buono.

He testified the couple were in a “very good relationship,” and expressed disappointment that “we just could not make it happen long term.”

In arguing for the Board of Examiners to overrule Buono’s decision, DeShan contended the judge had bias against him, his attorneys and his character witnesses.

He claimed “no competent or credible evidence” showed conduct unbecoming a teacher.

And DeShan said the state board was improperly relying on tenure charges that had been dismissed.

State Board of Examiners rejects DeShan arguments

The board disagreed with all of those points, saying the tenure challenge “had no bearing” on its action against DeShan’s certificates.

An arbitrator dismissed the tenure charges in April 2019, saying the district had already resolved its concerns over DeShan's conduct in Connecticut.

That happened in 2002 after the child's mother went public about DeShan and the district learned of their relationship, according to the arbitrator, Walter DeTreuX.

The district then suspended DeShan for three weeks, but he returned to the classroom after a finding that his pre-employment conduct had not violated any administrative rules. He also did not face criminal charges due to the statute of limitations for sexual assault in Connecticut.

DeTreuX also said the district had presented only hearsay evidence to support its charge regarding the student with green eyes.

But Buono said DeShan's testimony about his conduct helped proved the case against him "and in no way mitigated any responsibility."

The judge dismissed DeShan's motion to block the state board's action in a September 2021 ruling, but said the teacher could argue for a lesser penalty than revocation.

After testimony from DeShan and his character witnesses, Buono's October 2023 decision found revocation was "the only appropriate penalty" for conduct unbecoming a teacher.

"The conduct admitted to by DeShan is so egregious and disturbing that it shocks the conscience," said Buono.

The state board supported that view, saying it "agrees with (Buono's) assessment regarding DeShan's conduct and the appropriate resultant penalty."

"There will be an appeal," said an attorney for DeShan, Steven R. Cohen of Mount Laurel.

The board's decision describes the Cinnaminson district as DeShan's former employer, but does not say when he left the district.

State pension records put DeShan's annual salary at \$95,420 at year-end 2021.

DeShan held standard and advanced Teacher of Elementary School Grades K-8 certificates.

The district's superintendent, Stephen Cappello, declined comment about DeShan's time in Cinnaminson, saying personnel matters are confidential.

"At this time, I will not be providing any additional information," he said.

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