

To: All Texas School Board Members
From: Texas Chaplains
Re: Reject public school chaplain programs
Date: September 12, 2023

We, the undersigned chaplains, write in response to the Texas Legislature's recent passage of SB 763, requiring school districts to vote on whether to create a paid or volunteer chaplain program to "provide support, services, and programs for students."

Because of our training and experience, we know that chaplains are not a replacement for school counselors or safety measures in our public schools, and we urge you to reject this flawed policy option: It is harmful to our public schools and the students and families they serve.

There is no requirement in this law that the chaplains refrain from proselytizing while at schools or that they serve students from different religious backgrounds.

The law provides for chaplain salaries to be drawn from funds designated "to improve school safety and security." Those funds are directed at – but not limited to – the roles of restorative discipline and justice practices, mental and behavioral health support, and suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. We are deeply concerned about using chaplains in these roles to provide those services, particularly as the law does not require any specific training or qualifications.

SB 763 allows a school district to give any employee or volunteer who can pass a background check the title of "chaplain." This is simply not enough. Professional chaplains have specific education and expertise to fulfill our role in helping others engage their own religious practices and traditions. Typically, we are required to have a graduate theological degree and be supported by an approved organization connected to our spiritual tradition. In some settings, chaplains also must have one to two years of full-time experience as a religious or spiritual leader. Many of us are ordained in our faith tradition. Additionally, board certified chaplains in health care go through a rigorous certification process, pursuing hundreds of hours of extensive training and hands-on experience.

Our extensive training empowers us to follow the lead of the individuals seeking our spiritual care without imposing our own faith tradition upon them. For example, a Jewish military chaplain will advocate that a Muslim service member be able to pray the five daily prayers while deployed. A Christian hospital chaplain will help an atheist patient explain to her family her peace of mind that there is no afterlife.

As trained chaplains, we are not qualified for the duties envisioned by SB 763. We cooperate with mental health counselors – we do not compete with them. Further, professions which help children with sensitive matters, such as therapists and police investigators, typically require special training on how to interview and treat juveniles. Few chaplains have this expertise. Finally, using the school safety allotment to pay for chaplains is wholly inappropriate.

Chaplaincy programs do not train chaplains on active shooter situations or to be public safety professionals.

As trained chaplains, we strongly caution against the government assertion of authority for the spiritual development and formation of our public school children. We would never provide spiritual care to someone without their consent. And when children are involved, parental consent is necessary. Not only are chaplains serving in public schools likely to bring about conflict with the religious beliefs of parents, but chaplains serving in public schools would also amount to spiritual malpractice by the chaplains.

Government-sanctioned chaplains make sense in some settings, but not in our public schools. Many of us serve in contexts in which individuals cannot access their religious services — such as the military, a prison, or hospital — which is hardly the case for children in public school. Military members may have security or language barriers in finding a house of worship while on deployment. Incarcerated individuals are not given a “religious hall pass” to leave prison and attend the corporate worship service of their own choosing. Hospitalized patients may be too sick or far away from their congregations to engage in meaningful religious exercise.

Public school children simply do not face the barriers to religious exercise that service members, prisoners, and patients face. Parents or guardians must have the right to choose the religious leaders who will influence their children’s spiritual journey. Public schools should not interfere or alter parental decisions in the realm of religious exercise or spiritual care.

We are chaplains from a diversity of faith or ethical traditions living in or educated in Texas. We proudly serve(d) in various capacities, including as hospice, hospital, military, prison, or university chaplains.

We urge you to support religious freedom and parental rights by rejecting this harmful program to have government-approved chaplains in our public schools. We believe that a strong public school system is one in which the limited funding for safety and security of students is used to hire the most skilled professionals for those roles. We believe that families, not the government, are entrusted with their children’s spiritual development.

Respectfully,

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