

Chaplains Don't Belong Public Schools

A Toolkit for Opposing Chaplains in Public Schools

Background

There is a coordinated campaign in states across the country to pass legislation that would install chaplains in public schools to provide student-support services, including by serving as counselors and in other mental-health roles. Despite the sensitive and critical nature of these student-support positions, most of the proposed legislation does not require chaplains to have any professional licenses, education, training, or other qualifications in mental health or working with students.

Allowing unqualified chaplains in public schools not only risks harming students, but it also violates students' and families' religious freedom rights. Proposals to place clergy in our public schools threaten the well-being, education, and religious freedom of our students, and they risk liability for schools that substitute chaplain-provided student support for services that should be provided by certified and qualified professionals.

In 2023, the Texas legislature passed a bill authorizing school boards to hire, or accept as volunteers) chaplains to provide support services to students. Since the passage of the Texas bill, similar legislation has been introduced in states across the country. While these bills vary slightly in scope and operation, they all aim to inject religion into our public schools, no matter the harm that may occur to students and families. These bills are pushed and propagated by groups such as the National School Chaplain Association, which aims to help those who “desire to preserve and promote American Judeo-Christian values” in public schools and has characterized public schools as places where “children [are] being groomed for sexual perversion and being taught Marxism, CRT, and fake history.” Proponents of school chaplains, many of whom advocate for favoring Christianity in our legal system and institutions, aim to undermine the integrity of our public schools by transforming them into vehicles of religious indoctrination.

About This Toolkit

A coalition of faith-based and civil-rights and civil-liberties organizations¹ has developed this toolkit to assist parents, students, teachers, faith leaders, advocates, and concerned community members in understanding and opposing

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American Atheists, American Civil Liberties Union, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Center for American Progress, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC), Freedom From Religion Foundation, Interfaith Alliance, Keshet, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

school-chaplain bills that have been or might be introduced in their state legislatures.

In this toolkit, you will find an overview of how these bills will undermine students' religious freedom and well-being, what you can do to fight against them, and resources to help you as you advocate for your children, your schools, and the educational and civil rights of all students.

Why oppose School-Chaplain Bills?

These bills would permit public schools to create official school positions for chaplains. There are several key reasons to oppose these measures:

- **Allowing chaplains in public schools will inevitably lead to religious coercion and evangelizing of students and violate their religious freedom rights.** Under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, students and their families have the right to decide, for themselves, what religion, if any, to follow, without pressure from government officials. The primary role of chaplains is to provide pastoral or religious counseling to people in spiritual need. Allowing them to assume official roles—whether paid or voluntary—in public schools will create an environment ripe for unconstitutional religious coercion and evangelizing of students. Public schools are not Sunday schools, and students already have the ability and right to obtain religious guidance from their parents, families, and faith communities. Government-selected clergy do not belong in the public-school environment, which must be safe and welcoming for students of all religions, as well as those who do not follow any faith.
- **Chaplains are not certified or qualified to provide counseling, mental health care, or other support services to students.** Many bills explicitly or implicitly authorize school chaplains to serve in counseling and mental-health “student support” roles, even though they are not certified, trained, or otherwise qualified to work with youth or provide these services. School counselors must work to ensure success for *all* students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. They help students apply academic-achievement strategies, including setting academic goals, developing study skills, and overcoming learning challenges; provide evidence-based support and counseling to students experiencing crises such as grief, trauma, or mental health issues; and aid students in exploring career interests, setting career goals, and planning for post-secondary education or vocational training. School counselors are thus required to receive specialized

education and training. Although the requirements vary from state to state, public-school counselors typically must have a master's degree in the educational or counseling fields and documented and extensive experience teaching at an accredited school and/or counseling youth. Many states require school counselors to pass a counseling certification exam and mandate continuing education and training annually for school counselors. In addition, school counselors are typically bound by certain professional, ethical, and legal rules. The school-chaplain bills generally do not require chaplains to meet, or even come close to meeting, these same requirements.

- **Placing untrained and uncertified chaplains in mental health or other student-support roles will endanger students, waste precious educational resources, and create significant liability risks for schools.** School counselors and other student-support staff are uniquely qualified and certified for the duties they perform. Because chaplains do not possess the same credentials, even with the best of intentions, they could provide inappropriate responses or interventions that could harm students. And by relying on any uncertified individual to perform these duties risks harming students, and schools could be held liable. If public schools need additional staff to provide student services, including counseling, legislators should focus on providing access to qualified professionals. Our tax dollars should go to solutions that do not risk our children's well-being and do not support conduct that violates the Constitution.

What Do School-Chaplain Bills Say?

The provisions in school-chaplain bills vary from state to state, and different bills introduced in the same state may have different provisions. But any proposal to allow chaplains in public schools, either as volunteers or employees, is constitutionally problematic and risks harming students, even if the bill includes measures purportedly aimed at limiting such harm. Below are some provisions you might see in different school-chaplain bills, along with a short description of the concerns they raise:

- Most bills do not require school-chaplain candidates to have *any* baseline certification, experience, or training, even as a chaplain. Anyone could claim to be a chaplain and seek special access to students by volunteering to serve as a chaplain or seeking employment as one. Even though some bills may have such requirements, they typically do not require chaplains to have certifications, experience, or training in working with youth.
- Most bills would allow school chaplains to serve in counseling and other sensitive student-support roles, but do not require candidates to have any

certifications, training, or experience as an educational or mental-health professional. On the contrary, many bills explicitly state that schools may *not* require school-chaplain candidates to meet the same requirements as other student-support staff.

- Most school-chaplain bills do not restrict chaplains from evangelizing students or otherwise promoting religion to them. But even if some bills include this limitation, there is still a substantial risk that chaplains will violate it because they are trained to provide *religious* services and *spiritual* care, not secular counseling or other support services in the school setting.
- Some school-chaplain bills include requirements for parental consent or notification for chaplains either to work with students or provide explicitly religious services. But parental consent does not cure the constitutional concerns raised by allowing chaplains in schools, just as granting a public-school employee consent to teach creationism to a student or to baptize a child would not make it constitutionally permissible for school staff to do so.
- Some bills may attempt to restrict which religions school chaplains may follow by prohibiting, for example, Satanists from serving in the role. Discriminating against one or more faiths also violates the First Amendment and provisions that do so add yet another layer of unconstitutionality to these bills.

Getting Involved: How Can the Community Take Action?

Whether you are a parent, student, current or retired educator, or community member, you can advocate for all students and help prevent these harmful bills from passing. The most effective organizing will need to be done locally: organize with other parents, students, and local organizations. There are two critical points where advocacy can make a difference:

- **At your state legislature.** Before a school-chaplain bill is voted on, tell your state legislators that you do not want unqualified and uncertified chaplains in public schools. Tell them that every student deserves to feel safe and welcome in accessing school services and that school chaplains will create an environment ripe for religious coercion.
- **At your local school boards.** If your state legislature passes a school-chaplain bill, you can still advocate at the local level to discourage school districts from hiring or accepting chaplains on campus. Some school-chaplain bills even require that school boards hold a vote on the issue by a certain date. Tell

school board members that allowing chaplains in schools will violate students' religious freedom rights, risk serious harm to students' well-being, and create a significant liability risk for districts.

Opposing School-Chaplain Bills at Your State Legislature

It is critically important that parents, students, educators, and community members contact members of the state legislature to express concern about these bills. There are several ways you can express your opposition to lawmakers.

- **Email, call, or meet with your representatives.** Remember, you do not have to be an expert on this issue as long as you can effectively communicate how it affects you and your community.
- **Speak/testify at a committee hearing.** In most states, school-chaplain bills must receive a hearing with one or more committees of the state legislature before they are voted on by the full legislature. This is a critical time when you can impact these bills by speaking at the hearing in opposition.
 - Depending on your state, you can learn about upcoming hearings in different ways, such as signing up on the state legislative page for updates or calling the committee staff to ask about hearings.
 - When you learn about a hearing on a school-chaplain bill, check if your legislature has any special policies regarding speaking before a committee. Some state legislatures, for example, require speakers to sign up two days before the hearing. Some states allow you to testify remotely by video, while others require you to appear in person. Each person is typically limited to 2 to 3 minutes of testimony. Remember to focus on your own story and how the bill will impact you and your community.

Opposing School Chaplains at Your Local School Boards

If a bill is enacted in your state, it is important to take the fight against school chaplains to your local school board. As noted above, some bills require local school boards to hold a vote by a certain date regarding whether they will allow chaplains on campus. Even if a bill does not require school boards to vote, some school boards may decide to discuss the issue during meetings. Regularly check your school board's agenda, which is typically posted online in advance of each meeting, to see if the school-chaplain issue is mentioned.

- If the school-chaplains issue is on the agenda for a school board meeting, most school boards will set aside time to hear from parents or community members regarding specific proposals/topics on the agenda. Try to attend the meeting and speak about it. Be aware that some school boards require you to sign up at the meeting or before the meeting to speak, and some school boards may impose a time limit for each speaker, so you will want to prepare what to say in advance.
- Attending and speaking at a school board meeting is, in most cases, the most effective way to have your voice heard. However, if you are unable to do so, you could try sending an email or letter to school board members or calling them.

Writing your script for communicating with legislators and school boards

Whether speaking at a legislative hearing or school board meeting or interacting with lawmakers and local leaders in other ways, follow the outline below for general guidance on how to be most effective in your advocacy.

Email, Call, Testimony: Script Example for Communicating with Legislators

Dear Rep. (Last name),

Introduce Yourself

Example: *My name is _____, and I am a [parent/relative, student, educator, person of faith, community member] in [school district, city].*

State Your Stance on the Chaplain Bill

Example: *I am contacting you today to urge you to vote against the adoption of the school-chaplain bill during next week's vote.*

Why is this issue important to you and your community?

Example: *As an LGBT student who doesn't have access to an advisor who can guide me outside of my home, chaplains entering my school with unchecked access to students, will make me and my friends uncomfortable. I worry I will not receive unbiased support from a chaplain.*

Example: *As a Jewish parent with students in the public school system, I am concerned that allowing chaplains on campus to provide student-support services will lead to evangelizing of my children in a faith that we do not follow. Minority-faith students deserve to receive*

services without the risk of feeling pressured by official school clergy.

The Ask

Example: *I ask that you protect students' religious freedom and ensure that student-support services are provided by qualified professionals by voting against the school-chaplain bill. Public schools should be places where students of all faiths and none are respected and are prepared to thrive in our diverse state. That cannot happen if student-support services are turned over to government-selected religious leaders instead of certified educational and mental health professionals.*

Closing

Example: *Thank you for taking the time to [read my letter/ answer my call]. I hope you will keep my words in mind when voting.*

Sincerely,
(Full name)

(Address)
(Phone number)

Writing and sending letters to your local newspaper

Writing and sending letters to your local newspaper is a powerful way to let elected officials know where the public stands on issues that affect the community. These letters are also a good way to inform the rest of the community about what is happening.

Overall Tips to Remember:

- Know the word limit and keep it short and to the point. A letter to the editor is 150-200 words and usually addresses a specific issue in the community. If an article about the issue has been published by the outlet, refer to the article in your letter, e.g., *"In response to Tuesday's article, the school-chaplain bill has broader implications..."*
- Op-eds are usually 600-800 words and give a more in-depth opinion on a current event, not necessarily in response to a specific article. You can often see word limits by visiting the opinion page of your paper's website, or you can call and ask.

- Mention your elected officials by name in the letter or op-ed. Elected officials notice when their name is in the paper.
- When you're ready to submit your letter or op-ed, go to your local newspaper's website and search for directions for submitting it online or send it to wherever your newspaper receives physical mail.
- After submitting our letter or op-ed, call the paper the following day to make sure they received it. This call will help bump your letter up in the line. You can follow this script: "Hi, I am calling to make sure you received my letter to the editor [or op-ed] and ask if you know whether and when it will be published?"
- Check the paper each day after you submit your letter or op-ed. That way, you'll know as soon as it has been published, and you can begin sharing it on social media and email listservs so it reaches an even wider audience.
- Not everything you submit will be published. In writing or signing your letter to the editor or op-ed, it may be more likely to be published if you identify your connection to the issue. For example, you could mention that you are a parent of a public-school student, therapist, education advocate, or a religious leader or person of faith.

Note: Letters to the editor and op-eds are more likely to get published when submitted by an individual rather than a group.

Letter to the editors outline:

- Cite the specific article you are responding to
- State your position
- Tell your story
- State a few statistics or facts about the issue, and conclude with your call to action.

See a published letter to the editor from activists in Texas [here](#).

Op-ed outline:

- **Opening:** Catch the reader's attention
- **State your position:** offer evidence that backs up your opinion. This can be:
 - Personal stories
 - Quotes from reputable sources
 - Statistics/studies
 - Scripture
 - [Texas chaplains' opposition to the policy](#)
 - [National civil rights / legal organizations letter](#)

- [National letter from faith groups](#)
- [National letter from chaplains](#)
- **Call to action:** Ask readers to make sure legislators or school board members hear from them
- **Kicker:** End with a final piece of evidence, vision for the future, or circle back to your argument

See published op-eds opposing the Texas chaplain policy [here](#) and [here](#)

How to Talk About Chaplain Bills

Across the nation, people in communities from different backgrounds oppose installing chaplains in public schools. Strong messaging across our community ensures that our efforts are amplified and heard by lawmakers. Below are some messages we hope will resonate with community members and elected officials. Some messages may need to be adjusted depending on the particular provisions of a bill.

Tip: Focus on talking points you most identify with and align with the specific legislation in your state.

Religious Freedom

- **Allowing chaplains in public schools violates the Constitution and undermines the religious freedom of students and families.**
 - The U.S. Constitution protects the rights of students' right to attend public schools without the risk of school staff evangelizing them or imposing religion in any other way. Allowing chaplains to provide support services to students will inevitably lead to the unconstitutional promotion of religion and religious activities. No student in a public school should feel pressured by government officials to participate in religious activities or be indoctrinated into a particular religion.
 - For example, under the supervision of a chaplain, students could be pressured to submit to the chaplain's religious evangelism or join them in prayer.
 - These bills do not Nothing in the bill requires chaplains to provide unbiased services to those with whom they may disagree, such as students of different religions, nonreligious students, or LGBTQIA+ students.

- Allowing chaplains will lead to religious favoritism. There is no way for the school board to hire a chaplain of every religious faith. If the school board picks and chooses who to hire, it will be favoring some religions over others. This also may violate the First Amendment.
- Enjoying the freedom to decide one's own religious beliefs or lack thereof is a core part of what makes us American. Public-school chaplains will undermine this right for students and families.
- People of all religious backgrounds, and those who are not religious, know that public schools and government officials should not be dictating what our children believe or how they worship.
- The government is generally prohibited from hiring clergy. Courts have upheld the constitutionality of government-provided chaplains only in very limited settings where they are needed to accommodate the religious-exercise rights of people who would otherwise be unable to access religious services—for example, in prisons, public hospitals, or the military—or where chaplains have played a unique historical role in a particular setting, as in legislatures. Neither circumstance applies to public schools. Public-school students have broad access to religious services and clergy in their communities and through their parents and families.

Student Mental Health


- **Allowing chaplains to provide student-support services, such as mental-health counseling, will endanger students, waste precious educational resources, and create liability for schools.**
 - School counselors are certified and licensed educators who work to improve student success for all students by implementing a comprehensive school-counseling program. They help students apply academic achievement strategies, resolve emotional turmoil, apply interpersonal skills, and plan for college or the workforce.
 - Chaplains are religious leaders trained to provide religious services and spiritual care; unlike counselors, they are not given the professional training required to care for the mental health of all students. They are not required to have an advanced degree, be certified by state educational or mental-health boards or agencies, or be otherwise endorsed or licensed by any major or reputable entity.
 - Unregulated and untrained chaplains may engage in directly

harmful practices that would have a significant negative impact on vulnerable students, including those who face discrimination and are more likely to rely on school mental-health support services. Many vulnerable students, including some LGBTQIA+ students, may not feel comfortable going to a chaplain for mental health support at school for fear of being discriminated against or being subjected to conversion therapy.

- Without the credentials, experience, and training required of school counselors, chaplains will not be equipped to support students dealing with serious matters like anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, or suicidal ideation.
- Some public schools do need more support staff, including counselors. But the solution to that is to train and hire additional qualified professionals, not to place uncertified and inexperienced clergy in these roles.
- When a vulnerable student seeks mental health care at school, that care must be provided by a qualified professional. Relying on any uncertified individual to perform these duties could lead to harmful outcomes for students, and schools could be held liable.
- Unregulated chaplains may engage in directly harmful practices that endanger the mental health of students, such as discrimination and conversion therapy.

Other Resources and Materials

Need help organizing or advice on what to do next? Here is a list of organizations and resources that may be able to provide support:

- Texas State Teachers Association: Support Certified Counselors to Protect Our Kids  SB 763 flyer.pdf
- American School Counselor Association: The Role of a School Counselor <https://schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/ee8b2e1b-d021-4575-982c-c84402cb2cd2/Role-Statement.pdf>
- Interfaith Alliance's 'Say NO to Chaplains in Public Schools' petition <https://interfaithalliance.org/no-chaplains-in-public-schools/>

National Letters:

- [National Faith Opposition Sign-on Letter](#)
- [National Letter Explaining Legal Concerns with Bills](#)
- [National Sign-on Letter for Working or Trained Chaplains](#)
- National Parent Sign-on Letter

National Organizations:

- [ACLU](#)
- [American Atheists](#)
- [Americans United for the Separation of Church and State](#)
- [Baptist Joint Committee \(BJC\)](#)
- [Interfaith Alliance](#)

Relevant Media Articles:

- “Meet the Activists Behind the Texas Bill to Put Chaplains in Schools”, *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2023/05/26/meet-activists-behind-texas-bill-put-chaplains-schools/>
- “New Texas law deprives families of religious liberty rights”, *CNN*, September 11, 2023 <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/11/opinions/texas-chaplains-school-law-religious-liberty-tyler/index.html>
- “Texas will soon allow unlicensed chaplains to act as school counselors”, *NPR*, August 31, 2023 <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/31/1197084278/texas-will-soon-allow-unlicensed-chaplains-to-act-as-school-counselors>
- “With three weeks until statewide deadline, school district of ‘chaplain’ bill’s author is set to reject it”, *Baptist News Global*, February 9, 2024 <https://baptistnews.com/article/with-three-weeks-until-statewide-deadline-school-district-of-chaplain-bills-author-is-set-to-reject-it/>
- “Oklahoma Bill Would Violate Basic Freedoms”, *Rewrite the Ten Commandments*, Religious Dispatches, January 11, 2024 <https://religiondispatches.org/a-new-bill-that-would-violate-basic-freedoms-ok-legislators-have-rewritten-the-ten-commandments/>