

Opposition to House Bill No. 1456 – School Chaplains in Public School Districts

Dear Legislators,

I respectfully submit my opposition to the proposed bill, House Bill No. 1456, which seeks to authorize the employment or volunteer service of certified chaplains within North Dakota public school districts. While the intention of providing support services to students and staff is commendable, there are several critical concerns that need to be addressed before advancing such a measure.

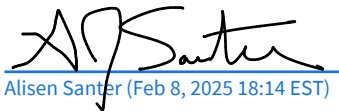
- 1. Separation of Church and State:** The most pressing concern with this bill is its potential violation of the principle of the separation of church and state, which is a cornerstone of our public education system. Public schools are meant to provide an inclusive, secular environment where students and staff are free from religious endorsement or coercion. By allowing chaplains – individuals explicitly connected to religious organizations – into public schools, this bill may unduly influence students' beliefs and create an atmosphere that could pressure students to conform to specific religious viewpoints.
- 2. Equity Across Religious Denominations:** If the state intends to allow a "Christian chaplain" as described in this bill, it creates a serious equity issue. Public schools should not show preferential treatment to any one religion over others. If the bill allows for a Christian chaplain, then, by the same logic, the state should be required to provide access to religious representatives from all faith traditions. This includes, but is not limited to, representatives from Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other belief systems. Without this requirement, the bill could be seen as endorsing a single religion, which contradicts the values of inclusivity and diversity that public education should promote.
- 3. Funding and Resource Allocation:** The proposed appropriation of \$500,000, as outlined in Section 2 of the bill, raises concerns regarding the efficient use of public funds. Rather than investing significant resources into hiring and overseeing chaplains, those funds could be better allocated to critical educational needs such as improving mental health counseling services, hiring additional school counselors, or providing academic support programs. These alternatives would ensure that all students, regardless of religious affiliation, have access to appropriate and comprehensive support services.
- 4. Lack of Clear Accountability:** The bill's provision that no cause of action arises against a certified chaplain unless their actions are malicious or intended to harm raises significant questions about accountability and transparency. What constitutes "malicious" intent is subjective and could result in a lack of clear guidelines for chaplains, leading to potential overreach or misuse of their position within schools.
- 5. Unintended Consequences for Vulnerable Students:** Students from diverse backgrounds or those who may not adhere to any particular faith could find themselves in a difficult and potentially uncomfortable situation if religious figures are placed in their school environment. For some students, being exposed to religious support services may feel coercive, particularly if they are in crisis or seeking guidance. Without proper safeguards and clear boundaries, this could exacerbate feelings of alienation or marginalization.

Conclusion: While it is important to address the emotional and psychological needs of students in public schools, this bill does so in a way that raises significant constitutional, ethical, and practical concerns. If the intention is to provide support services, then the focus should be on professional mental health counselors, social workers, or other trained personnel who can offer guidance and assistance without the potential for religious coercion.

I urge lawmakers to reconsider this bill and explore alternative solutions that would support all students in a way that respects the principles of inclusivity, equality, and the separation of church and state. Should religious representatives be introduced into schools, they must be provided in an equitable manner, representing a diverse array of beliefs and respecting the personal convictions of each student.

Thank you for considering this opposition.

Sincerely,



[Alisen Santer \(Feb 8, 2025 18:14 EST\)](#)

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