

North Dakota Legislative Assembly
600 E Boulevard Ave
Bismarck, ND 58505

Opposition to House Bill 1456 – Requiring Chaplains in Public Schools

Dear Members of the North Dakota Legislative Assembly,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to House Bill 1456, which seeks to mandate the presence of chaplains in public schools, most likely Christian in nature. This bill is not only unconstitutional but also creates an environment of inequity, exclusion, and potential harm to students and families of diverse backgrounds.

Public schools are institutions designed to serve all students, regardless of their religious beliefs. Chaplains in these schools directly contradicts the foundational principle of separation of church and state, as outlined in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Such a mandate marginalizes students and families who follow different faith traditions than the Christian clerical professional likely to be found—or those who choose not to follow any religion at all. It is crucial that public schools remain neutral spaces where all students feel included and respected, not places that favor a specific religious ideology.

Beyond issues of fairness and legality, this bill also presents serious safety concerns. Given the documented history of clerical sexual abuse within religious institutions, requiring chaplains in schools could introduce additional risks to vulnerable students. Unlike professional school counselors, chaplains may not be held to the same professional ethical standards or regulatory oversight. Placing individuals in positions of authority over children without stringent safeguards is deeply irresponsible and contradicts the very mission of protecting students. Furthermore, we are all aware that background checks alone are insufficient in preventing clerical predators from gaining access to children, as history has repeatedly shown.

Additionally, the financing for this initiative comes from a fund that should be allocated to already underserved educators. Public school teachers and staff are in dire need of resources, support, and fair compensation. Diverting funds to impose religious figures in schools instead of addressing critical educational and mental health needs is a blatant misuse of public funds and a disservice to both students and educators.

Furthermore, implementing this bill would divert critical resources away from evidence-based mental health support that students desperately need. School counselors, social workers, and psychologists are trained professionals who provide essential, secular support to students struggling with academic, social, and emotional challenges. Instead of mandating religious figures, legislators should focus on strengthening mental health services in schools, ensuring that students have access to qualified professionals who can meet their needs in an inclusive and ethical manner.

Having Christian chaplains in public schools not only fosters division but also undermines the legal, ethical, and educational integrity of our institutions. I urge you to reject House Bill 1456

and instead work toward policies that promote true inclusivity, student safety, and equal access to necessary support services for all children, regardless of their religious background.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chaleigh Pedrini-Clark', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Chaleigh Pedrini-Clark, PhD, NCC
Professional School Counselor
Nationally Certified Mental Health Counselor
Central Regional Education Association (CREA)
208-819-0248