

**Dear Chair and Members of the House Education Committee,**

I'm writing to strongly oppose House Bill 1456, which would allow public school districts to employ or accept volunteer chaplains to provide support to students, staff, and families. While I understand the intent behind the bill—to offer additional support to school communities—it raises serious concerns about religious neutrality, legal accountability, and the responsible use of public education resources.

The parts of this bill that trouble me the most are:

**Lack of Training and Oversight:** Unlike teachers, school counselors, or social workers, chaplains would not be required to meet the rigorous standards set by the Education Standards and Practices Board. That means individuals providing support to students wouldn't necessarily have training in child development, trauma-informed care, or mental health best practices. Without clear guidelines or oversight, there's no guarantee that chaplains would provide consistent, professional, or even safe guidance to students.

**Limited Accountability:** The bill grants chaplains legal immunity except in cases of willful harm. This drastically reduces accountability and could leave families with little recourse if a chaplain oversteps boundaries or causes harm—whether intentional or not. Schools should be places where students receive support from trained professionals, not individuals who are shielded from responsibility.

Beyond these concerns, the introduction of religiously affiliated chaplains into public schools raises serious constitutional issues. Public schools are meant to be religiously neutral so that all students—regardless of their faith or beliefs—feel welcome, included, and respected. Bringing in chaplains, who are certified by religious organizations, creates the perception (and possibly the reality) of government endorsement of certain religious beliefs. This could lead to legal challenges and further divisions in our school communities.

Even if participation in chaplain services is technically voluntary, students may still feel pressure to engage—especially in environments where adults hold influence over them. Students from different religious backgrounds, or those who don't practice any religion, might feel left out or even stigmatized. Public schools should be a place where every child feels like they belong—not where they feel excluded or subtly pressured based on their beliefs.

Finally, **this bill comes with a \$500,000 price tag**—public funds that could instead be used to address real, pressing needs in our schools. We should be investing in mental health counseling, teacher retention, and academic support programs—proven strategies that actually help students. Instead, this bill diverts resources to a program that introduces constitutional and social risks while offering little to no evidence-based benefit.

I urge you to vote against this bill and instead focus on initiatives that ensure all students receive inclusive, professional, and well-regulated support in North Dakota's public schools.

Sincerely,

Kara L. Geiger  
Mandan, ND