

Testimony of Coach Joe Kennedy

2/10/25

Honorable Members of the North Dakota House Education Committee

Thank you for allowing me to speak today. My name is **Joe Kennedy**, and I am here to share my story—not just as a former football coach, but as someone who has fought for faith and freedom in our schools. My journey took me from the **football field** to the **Supreme Court**, and now to this room, where I stand in support of something greater than my personal case: the need for **school chaplains**.

For years, I was privileged to coach young men in **Bremerton, Washington**. Like many coaches, I saw my role as far more than drawing up plays. I was there to **guide, encourage, and support** students as they navigated the challenges of growing up. After each game, I made it a habit to kneel in prayer at midfield—a personal act of gratitude. Over time, some players noticed, a few joined in, and eventually, many of them sought me out—not just for football advice, but for **direction, wisdom, and hope**.

But rather than recognizing the **positive influence** this had on students, the school district saw it as a problem. I was told to stop, placed on leave, and ultimately pushed out of the job I loved—all because I refused to abandon a fundamental part of who I am.

For seven years, I fought in court, and in **2022, the Supreme Court ruled in my favor**, affirming that public school employees **do not have to give up their faith** in order to serve students. But this fight was never just about me. It was about every **teacher, coach, and mentor** who wants to support young people **without fear of losing their job**.

The Crisis in Our Schools

Every day, students walk into classrooms carrying **burdens far heavier than a backpack**. They face **broken families, depression, bullying, addiction, and even thoughts of suicide**. Many of them have no one to turn to. During my time as a coach, I saw firsthand how having **a trusted adult who cared about their well-being** made all the difference.

But I was just one coach, and I could only do so much. Imagine if **every school** had a chaplain—someone students could go to for **encouragement, prayer, and guidance**. Someone to remind them they are not alone. Someone to offer **strength, support, and perspective** during the most challenging moments of their lives.

The impact of chaplains in schools is undeniable. In schools where they have served, we have seen:

- ✓ **Lower suicide rates**
- ✓ **Decreased behavioral issues**
- ✓ **Higher graduation rates**
- ✓ **Greater emotional resilience among students and teachers**

These aren't just statistics. These are lives. These are **kids who need hope**. A young man struggling with anger because his dad left. A girl who's been bullied so much that she doesn't want to come to school. A teacher who's exhausted and questioning whether their work even matters. **Chaplains are there in those moments, offering support, encouragement, and faith.**

The Opportunity Before Us

When my case was decided, it was a reminder that **faith has a place in our schools**. And now, you have an opportunity to take that a step further. This **school chaplain bill** is not about forcing religion on anyone. It's about ensuring that students and teachers **who want** spiritual support have someone they can turn to.

I didn't fight for my rights just for myself—I fought for every student, teacher, and coach who believes that faith belongs in our schools. Today, I urge you to fight for them too. Passing this bill means giving students **access to encouragement, wisdom, and a source of strength** in their most difficult moments.

Let's do what is right for our children. Let's bring **faith, hope, and guidance** back into our schools.

Thank you, and may God bless you and the students of North Dakota.

Coach Joe Kennedy