

Milnor Public School District No. 2

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www.milnor.k12.nd.us

Chris Larson, Superintendent and Activities Director

Ryan Weber, High School Principal

Theresa Wittich, Elementary Principal

1 Testimony in Opposition to HB 1456

2 Presented to the North Dakota Legislative Assembly

3 February 11, 2025

4 Chairperson Heinert, members of the committee, my name is Dr. Chris Larson and I serve as
5 Superintendent at Milnor Public School. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in opposition to House
6 Bill 1456.

7 While I respect the intent of this legislation to provide additional support for students and staff, I have
8 serious concerns about the fiscal responsibility, lack of supervision and accountability, and the potential
9 for taxpayer dollars to be directed toward an unnecessary and unproven program.

10 Misuse of Public Funds

11 HB 1456 proposes to allocate **\$500,000 from the general fund** to support salaries, training, and
12 oversight of school chaplains. While the bill states that **no single district may receive more than**
13 **\$200,000**, there is no clear justification for this spending, nor is there an outlined system for how this
14 money will be distributed fairly among schools.

15 At a time when **public schools are struggling with budget constraints**, this funding would be far
16 better spent on **proven, evidence-based student support programs**.

- 17
- 18 • We already have trained school counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals who
19 are qualified to provide support to students. Instead of funding a new category of personnel, the
20 state should be increasing resources for existing staff and programs that are trained to address
21 student mental health and well-being.
 - 22 • This bill does not define how chaplains will be trained, supervised, or evaluated, yet taxpayer
23 dollars will be used to fund their salaries and oversight. There is no mechanism to ensure that
24 this money is being spent effectively or that students are receiving the best possible care.
 - 25 • There is no accountability for outcomes. If we are investing public funds into a program, there
26 should be clear metrics for success. The bill does not outline how the effectiveness of school
27 chaplains will be measured, who will be responsible for oversight, or how results will be
reported to the public.

28 Lack of Supervision and Accountability

29 One of the most alarming aspects of HB 1456 is that it exempts school chaplains from professional
30 licensing requirements.

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- 1 • Chaplains do not have to be licensed by the Education Standards and Practices Board, meaning
2 they are not subject to the same professional or ethical standards as school counselors or mental
3 health professionals.
- 4 • The bill does not require school chaplains to report to a supervisor within the school district or
5 adhere to standardized confidentiality and student safety protocols. Without a clear chain of
6 accountability, how can we ensure chaplains are operating in the best interest of students?
- 7 • There is no disciplinary process outlined. If a school counselor, teacher, or administrator engages
8 in misconduct, there are clear procedures for disciplinary action. What process exists for a
9 chaplain who oversteps professional boundaries? The bill is silent on this issue.
- 10 • The bill limits liability for chaplains, stating that they cannot be sued unless they act
11 "maliciously, willfully, and deliberately" to harm, harass, or intimidate. This creates a dangerous
12 loophole in which chaplains can act without the same level of accountability as licensed
13 professionals.

14 Missed Opportunity for Responsible Investment

15 Instead of funding a program with no clear oversight, no required professional qualifications, and no
16 accountability for results, the Legislature should focus on strengthening existing student support services
17 that already have proven success:

- 18 • Invest in school counselors and social workers who have the expertise to support students in a
19 safe, professional, and secular manner.
- 20 • Expand mental health resources in schools through funding for behavioral health specialists,
21 school psychologists, and trauma-informed programs.
- 22 • Ensure taxpayer dollars are spent on initiatives that provide measurable benefits to all students,
23 rather than introducing a new category of personnel with unclear responsibilities and
24 qualifications.

25 Conclusion

26 HB 1456 lacks fiscal responsibility, adequate oversight, and necessary accountability measures. It
27 proposes spending public funds on a program that is vague, unregulated, and redundant, given the
28 existing student support professionals in our schools.

29 For these reasons, I urge the committee to **vote NO on HB 1456** and instead prioritize funding for
30 **proven student support initiatives** that directly contribute to student success.

31 Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions from the committee.

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1 Respectfully submitted,

2

3 Dr. Chris Larson

4 Superintendent

5 Milnor Public School

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