

HB 1456: School Chaplains
House Education Committee
February 11, 2025
Presented by Rep. SuAnn Olson

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am excited to bring you HB 1456 which is a bill for school chaplains in either an employed or volunteer capacity. I first heard about school chaplaincy programs about a year and half ago from the National School Chaplain Association. The CEO, Rocky Malloy, explained that in schools where they have had a chaplain in place for two or more years, there had been NO suicides among the more than 35,000 schools and 30 million people they served. NONE. I got chills. We could save lives. In 2023, the most recent year that we have data, 15 ND teens committed suicide. Another 34 were in their 20s. Both are age groups that can be significantly impacted by a school chaplain program.

Here's a summary of the bill:

HB 1456 adds a new chapter to NDCC 15.1-07.

Section 1, Line 7 explains that a certified chaplain must either be certified by a national or state chaplaincy organization or be ecclesiastically endorsed by a religious organization.

Line 9 explains that a school may employ or utilize a volunteer chaplain.

Lines 12-19 states that a chaplain does not need to be licensed as a teacher but must undergo a background check and of course not be required to register as a sex offender.

Line 20 states that a cause of action does not arise for action or statements made while providing chaplain services unless the action or statement was malicious, willful and deliberately intended to cause harm.

Section 2 of the bill provides for a pilot program for at least 3 school districts so that we can get a few chaplaincy programs off the ground. My goal is that the program will be so fantastically successful that other schools will want to jump on board. Success will mean that teacher retention goes up, classroom disruptions are minimized, and children thrive.

We had a last minute change of plans as two incredibly qualified people were on deck to speak to you in person about chaplains and why they are important in the school setting, but the White House called them over the weekend and wanted them in Washinton DC for a meeting with the newly

formed Faith Office that President Trump is setting up to discuss, among other things, the very topic of our bill today.

Chaplain (Major General) Tom Solhjem USA Ret., who was going to appear today, has submitted testimony and it has been handed out. First, he gives us a good history of religious freedoms, going back to Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists regarding their concern over one national religion. The true meaning of the separation of church and state is to ensure that the government does not establish a national religion or interfere with individuals' right to practice their faith. He walks us through the various court cases that began in the 1960s and goes on to discuss the Kennedy vs Bremerton School District that was decided in 2022. This case upended what had become known as the "Lemon test" and asserts that the "establishment clause" must be interpreted by reference to historical practices and understandings.

Chaplain Solhjem goes on to summarize the conclusions that are found in two books by noted author and clinical Psychologist, Dr. Lisa Miller, who also got called to the White House. Her two landmark books are *The Spiritual Child* and *The Awakened Brain*. Dr. Miller's research finds that we are inherently, genetically spiritual and that genetic expression of spirituality surges in adolescence. Dr. Miller and her team studied generations of depressed and non-depressed women, their children and grandchildren and took MRIs of their brains. When they collated the data, they discovered that the composite brain of participants with sustained, high spirituality looked vastly different from the low spiritual brain. The high spiritual brain was thicker and stronger in exactly the same regions that weaken and wither in depressed brains.

A strong spiritual core, a personal faith or belief shared with others is like a vaccine. Those with a strong spiritual core are 80% more protected against substance abuse, 60% protected against major depressive disorders, 65-80% more protected from the risk of suicide.

Members of the committee, this bill isn't only about the students. In my Judiciary committee, we heard testimony a few weeks ago about the difficulty schools are having with what the person termed "ungovernable" children. What we've been doing hasn't been working very well. And this has created a strain on teachers. My daughter in law served as a long-term substitute high school teacher this fall. She concurs. The last day couldn't

come soon enough. The National Education Association reports that "teacher burnout" is real; that teachers can feel like they're not doing enough for their students; that they can be overwhelmed by a lack of support. Chaplains are there for them too. In fact, supporting teachers and other staff is a major role for chaplains. Children will do better if their teachers are supported.

I want to direct your attention to the packets that have been distributed. The packet contains a fact sheet, an explanation of the role of chaplains, several pages devoted to the constitutionality of Chaplains, questions and answers, and Model Policies.

We have some very qualified people to talk about school chaplains today via video. The first will be Joe Kennedy, of the Supreme Court case Kennedy vs. Bremerton School District, Next will be Jim Schmidt, then Johnny Davis, both with the National School Chaplains Association and finally Bill Alexson, Chaplain for the NBA.

They can answer many of your questions, so I'd like to defer to them. I will stay in the room and will be happy to answer questions later if you would like.

I respectfully urge you to give HB 1456 a DO PASS recommendation.
Thank you.