

Chairman, Rep. Patrick Heinert  
Members of the ND State Education Committee

Thank you for this opportunity to share my comments with your Education Committee. By way of introduction, I am deeply committed citizen of this great country, a North Dakota native, and servant of God and Country. As a steward of 49 years in the Army, 36 as a chaplain, culminating as the US Army's Chief of Chaplains, it is my aim to assist the federal government, states, local municipalities, institutions, and organizations in developing a model for chaplaincy that builds on a constitutional foundation of free exercise of religion, religious pluralism coupled with evidenced based science and research on spiritual life, faith and belief, shared in community to produce better healthy life outcomes and citizens.

The purpose of my comments today are to show the strongest support for placing properly trained chaplains who understand the importance of religious pluralism and free exercise in schools. First, I want to address points of misunderstanding as it relates to the constitution, law, and policy. Secondly, the critical importance of daily spiritual life, faith and belief shared in community with others, based on evidenced based science, to healthy positive outcomes for our nation's schools and communities. Lastly, what the chaplaincy is and is not. What makes this challenging is the bias, intolerance, and discrimination against religious and spiritual integration in the public square. We do this at our own peril.

1. Several recent Supreme Court cases regarding religious freedoms, liberties, and free exercise are reshaping the relationship of religion and spiritual life in the public square.

The wall of separation between Church and State is not in the constitution. It was referenced from Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptist's 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 the individuals' rights to practice their faith. This principle, rooted in the First Amendment, aims to protect religious freedom while allowing personal beliefs to inform political views without government intervention.

Supreme Court cases, under pressure to be more inclusive, beginning in the 1960's began a trend without historical precedence in law to favor the establishment clause at the expense of free exercise in public education. Engel vs. Vitale (1962) and Abington School District vs. Schempp (1963) are examples of dismantling long standing practices of prayer in school or school related events. The Supreme Court for nearly four decades used the three-pronged Lemon test (Lemon vs. Kurtzman, 1971) to evaluate whether a law or governmental activity violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment.

However, by 2022, the court abandoned the test as a way to measure compliance with the First Amendment's prohibition on government "establishment of religion." In 2022 in Kennedy v. Bremerton, a case involving a high school football coach's group post-game prayers, the authoring Supreme Court justice, Justice Neil Gorsuch, ruled instead that the establishment clause "must be interpreted by 'reference to historical practices and understandings.'" Gorsuch believed that the lower courts had created a "vice between the Establishment Clause on one side and the Free Speech and Free Exercise Clauses on the other."

He associated such conflict with the three-part Lemon test which was ruled unconstitutional. To date several states are joining to gather to reestablish historical practices and understandings under the constitution as it relates to establishment and free exercise. The Chaplain Act or Chaplain in Schools is gaining national approval based in the constitution, law, and policy.

2. Spiritual life embrace coupled with a personal faith and belief shared in community with others is the most proven protective factor of anything in the clinical sciences. Evidenced-based scientific research shows the importance of spiritual integration, faith and belief, in adolescence and emerging adults are critical elements of healthy human functioning.

Daily spiritual life development and personal faith integration are key components to health, well-being, and positive life outcomes. Research and surveys show that over 90% of Americans see themselves as spiritual, 70% as religious and religious but less so with GEN Z, and 10% neither religious or spiritual. This generation is however searching for meaning and purpose that institutions are failing to provide so they are pursuing it through social media.

Evidenced base science and research data shows that nothing in the social sciences is as protective, preventive or predictive of healthy life outcomes than a daily religious and spiritual practice that strengthens a person's core and shapes healthy development throughout one's lifetime. Scientific evidence based research shows that we are born spiritual (30% innate and 70% environment), Temperament is 50/50, and IQ is 60/40.

A strong spiritual core, a personal faith or belief shared in community with others breaks down as follows: 80% more protective against substance dependence and abuse; 60% protective against Major Depressive Disorder "Build Muscle"; 70% protective against risk taking; 65-80% decreased relative risk for suicidality & more % with a religious foundation. The cultural misdiagnosis of soaring mental health issues is really a depleted spiritual core which leads to unhealthy physical, mental, and emotional outcomes. You can't keep doing the same thing expecting a different result.

As the Army Chief of Chaplains, I lead an Army-wide holistic health effort in concert with the Army Surgeon General and Chief of Behavioral Health to educate the Army's people on spiritual readiness. The very successful Spiritual Readiness Initiative work with Army leaders, chaplains, soldiers, medical providers, behavioral health, and families etc. brought significant change and improved Army-wide readiness. Observed was a decrease in suicides, substance abuse, respect for others etc. and improved human performance and functioning. Of note this was in the midst of COVID. The integration of the spiritual and faith pillars in the Army demonstrated positive proof that developing spiritual readiness and religious pluralism are critical components to individual and organizational cohesion, teamwork, respect for others, relational and ethical decision-making, and healthy life outcomes.

3. Chaplain integration in K-12, working with parents/guardians, teachers, administrators, superintendents, and communities are critical components to holistic health in our culture. Meaningful professional

chaplain integration in K-12 provides everyone a safe confidant, early warning of negative behaviors such as suicide, suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, relational dysfunction, bullying, and misuse of social media just to name a few. Chaplains help shape the educational environment with enhanced moral and ethical decision-making, relational ethics, judgment, treatment of others, improved student functioning, academic outcomes, and respect for authority with a greater sense of meaning and purpose often missing in our nation's youth. The right chaplains coupled with evidenced based science on spiritual life and faith/belief efficacy on human thriving and healthy outcomes in adolescence, youth, emerging adults, and adults is sorely needed in our nation's educational system.

The implementation of a chaplain program requires professional training, certification, and credentials by recognized religious institutions that is caring, others focused, religiously pluralistic, promotes spiritual well-being, inclusive of those who are religious and those who are not, and strengthens the community. Chaplaincy does not promote a particular religious group or faith tradition but the constitutionally protected practice of free exercise seen in religious pluralism. Religious pluralism and free exercise are critical components to the foundations of religion and the chaplaincy historically in America.

Chaplains support (perform or provide) the holistic integration of spiritual life, care, confidential counsel, prayer, advisement, and religious practices just to name a few for the entire school system, families, and community of those with a faith practice or no faith affiliation at all. They are educated, trained, certified, and ecclesiastically endorsed religious professionals focused on the spiritual well-being of all individuals who by their very nature are . This also includes personal religious practices and beliefs that chaplains are uniquely qualified to understand, address, deliver or coordinate.

The entire school system and community benefits from and is healthier for the integration of chaplains. This includes but is not limited to: students, teachers, faculty, staff, administrators and superintendents families/guardians, and the local community. Evidenced-based science and research highlights the spiritual pillar as the hub for physical, mental, emotional, and relational healthy outcomes we see in people and most importantly in the development of our nation's youth. It is the most important protective factor know in the clinical sciences. A strong spiritual core, coupled with a personal faith and belief, shared in community with others are the most preventive and protective factors know to combat against harmful behaviors such as substance abuse, suicide/ideation, depression, anxiety, bullying, and how we treat others relationally. Our schools are failing to daily develop the spiritual core. The result is generations of youth that lack a real sense life meaning and purpose, optimism, grit, gratitude, forgiveness, resilience, and the ability to persevere in times of trail or struggle. They would rather quit than fail. An ever increasing sense of entitlement with no consequences for poor ethical or moral decision-making. We now have a culture that is largely religiously illiterate, spiritually non-conversant, morally fractured, lacking in civility towards its fellow citizens and soulmates.

This is a time for action. The inaction of the last decades has produced a real decline in the overall healthy life outcomes, values and, morals of the American youth and our Nation.

VR,  
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