

Faith Organizations' Open Letter Regarding Public School Chaplains

March 6, 2024

As organizations that represent or serve religious denominations or are formally affiliated with religious communities, we express our deep concern about legislation in states across the country that would install chaplains in our public schools. Although we appreciate the desire to provide our students with additional resources, the proposals to place chaplains in our public schools are greatly flawed and threaten the well-being, education, and religious freedom of our students.

Chaplains can play a vital role in helping people engage in the practices and traditions of their religions and beliefs, but most chaplains are not trained or qualified to perform the duties of school counselors or school support staff. School counselors and other student support staff must complete professional training and certification ensuring that they can implement school counseling and other programs to deliver services that support students' academic, career, social, and emotional development. They must demonstrate that they are qualified to provide appropriate responses and interventions for students of all backgrounds and abilities.

Chaplains, by contrast, are trained as religious leaders to provide religious services and spiritual care. They do not have the same academic and professional credentials as school counselors and other support staff. Relying on any untrained and uncertified individual to serve students could lead to real harm to students, and schools could be held liable.

Furthermore, installing chaplains in our public schools would violate students' and families' religious freedom. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees us all the right to choose for ourselves which faith, if any, to follow—without pressure or influence from government officials. Religious freedom means that all students should feel welcome in our public schools, and no student should have to sacrifice their religious freedom to access counseling or other support services.

Having a school chaplain of any faith would amount to government-sponsored religion and create an environment ripe for religious coercion and the indoctrination of students. That is why courts have repeatedly ruled that it is unconstitutional for public schools to invite religious leaders onto campus to engage in religious activities, such as prayer and religious counseling, with students.

Public school students are young, vulnerable, and susceptible to peer pressure and the influence of teachers and school officials. A student who is referred to a chaplain would likely feel pressured to consent to participate in or submit to religious activities and counseling in order to get the services they need. Students may even forgo seeking services altogether if they know that the chaplain's religious views conflict with their own or the help they need will be provided by someone who is not trained and certified in working with students.

Government-sanctioned chaplains may be permissible in some limited settings—but not in our public schools. For example, the government has provided chaplains in the military, prisons, and hospitals—places where chaplains are needed to accommodate the religious-exercise rights of people who would otherwise not be able to access religious services. Public school children face no such barriers.

Requiring parental consent does not save these proposals. School-sponsored religious activities are unconstitutional even if parents give permission for their child to participate. And parental consent would not alleviate the threat of harm to students that a well-meaning, but untrained, chaplain might cause.

The families and students in our nation practice a wide variety of faiths, and many are nonreligious. All students—regardless of their religion—have the right to receive services free from religious proselytization. We therefore urge you to reject any proposed policy that would create chaplain programs in our public schools. Our students deserve better.

Alliance of Baptists
American Conference of Cantors
The Ancient Apostolic Church of Alexandria
ADL (Anti-Defamation League)
Association of Reform Jewish Educators
B'nai B'rith International
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Central Conference of American Rabbis
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF)
Disciples Center for Public Witness
Disciples Justice Action Network
Equal Partners in Faith
Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America
Hindus for Human Rights
Interfaith Alliance
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Keshet
Men of Reform Judaism
Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)
National Council of Jewish Women
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies
North American Federation of Temple Youth
Rabbinical Assembly
Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
The Sikh Coalition
Society for Humanistic Judaism
SOJOURN: Southern Jewish Resource Network for Gender & Sexual Diversity
Sojourners-SojoAction
Southern Christian Coalition
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
The Shalom Center
Union for Reform Judaism

Unitarian Universalist Association
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
United Church of Christ
Women of Reform Judaism