



Written by [James Murphy](#) on May 17, 2023

Texas Advances Bill to Allow Chaplains at Public Schools

Last week, legislators in Texas advanced [Senate Bill 763](#), which, if enacted, would make it legal to employ or accept as a volunteer a chaplain in public schools in the state. Such a chaplain would be allowed to “provide support, services, and programs for students as assigned by the board of trustees of the district or the governing body of the school.”

The GOP-controlled House approved the measure ([HB 3614](#)) last week in a party line vote of 89-58, with the state’s Senate having approved it earlier. The chaplains could function instead of or in addition to school counselors.



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The most recent iteration of the bill included an amendment that any chaplain accepting such a position must be certified and not be on a sex-offender registry.

Opponents of the bill point out that most school counselors have a master’s degree along with two years’ experience in the classroom. Such counselors are also required to have a valid school counselor certificate. While any chaplain would have to be certified as a chaplain, they would not need to provide a school counselor certificate.

The legislation would not require chaplains in place of counselors, it would only make it legal for schools to choose that route.

“I want to make sure that we’re making it clear — that everybody knows — that schools may choose to do this, or not, and that they can put whatever rules and regulations in place that they see fit,” said chaplain advocate Representative Cole Hefner, a Republican, in response to a question from a Democratic colleague. “I think, just to be blunt with you, we can trust the school boards to do that.”

While the school boards would have a choice of whether to employ chaplains or not, the legislation would require that each board take an up and down vote so that the individual school members would be on record with their school district on how they voted.

Another Republican, Senator Mayes Middleton, who helped write the legislation, pointed out that chaplains are an integral part of many government agencies.

“Chaplains are part of our communities in the military, police, fire chaplains. They represent God in our government institutes,” Middleton noted in a Senate Education Committee meeting. “Schools don’t have to hire chaplains under this bill. However, for the same reasons why they work so well for our public safety officials are the same reasons that I believe chaplains will work well for our students.”

Opponents of the bill claim that allowing chaplains in public schools would blur the so-called separation between church and state — a phrase found nowhere in the Constitution but in a [letter](#) Thomas Jefferson penned to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802. In the letter, Jefferson referred to “building a wall of separation between Church & State.”



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But anti-religion zealots have jumped on that phrase to mean that faith has no place in government whatsoever, even though Congress itself has maintained a chaplain since its inception.

“Texas students, who are a diverse community with varied religious views and cultural practices, deserve to enjoy true religious freedom at public schools without being forced to learn according to the religious right’s belief system,” said Shan Schaffer of the Texas Freedom Network, an organization claiming to work to counter the activities of the Christian right.

According to Schaffer, LGBT students are most at risk of chaplains in schools.

“Finding your own spiritual journey is a deeply personal one that should be guided by a child’s personal connections, not forced upon them by strangers that were not directly given trust by the child or their parent. HB 3614 and SB 763 create not only barriers to religious freedom but also put LGBTQIA+ children at risk of discrimination and harm that could have been avoided if legislators instead focused on funding enough trained, accepting counselors,” Schaffer explained.

But at least one chaplain hopeful believes that having a counselor of faith would be yet another arrow in the quiver of schools who need healing following tragic events.

Todd Taylor, a teacher who believes he is being called to shift his career from the classroom to being one of the chaplains being spoken of, told of a crisis team that came to his school after a kindergartner drowned.

“They spent one day in our school with his class, and then they left,” Taylor remembered. “If we had chaplains in schools, they would be there every day. They would personally know those kids. The teachers, myself included, were given a phone number to call if you need help. If we had chaplains there, we would get the help we needed.”

A chaplain in a school setting would not be there to proselytize so much as to be a friendly voice to listen to concerns of students (or teachers) who reach out. Students and staff members in today’s public schools could use such a voice, particularly the LGBT students that some are so concerned about.



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