

## Reject or Study Public School Chaplains

In 2023, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 763, which gives public school districts the option to hire religiously affiliated chaplains to complement or replace some or all of their school counselors. While SB 763 gives school districts a choice as to whether they hire chaplains, the bill requires every school board to take a record vote on the matter. In other words, school boards cannot simply “take a pass” on the question of employing chaplains: they must either affirm or reject the practice.

As people of faith, we urge school boards to reject any such policy. Should a school board decide not to reject such a policy, then we urge the board to vote to study other professional chaplaincy programs before pioneering an unproven model on public school children.

Chaplains are religious professionals that support the spiritual, emotional, existential, and religious needs of an individual that cannot otherwise access religious services in a pluralistic institution—such as the military, prisons, or hospitals. These religious professionals facilitate the religious free exercise of the individual. If a conflict arises between the faith of the person served and the religious professional, the religious professional does not favor or promote their own faith tradition over the individual’s.

The support, services, and programs that a chaplain provides is context-specific for the setting in which they serve. These religious professionals have clear roles, and are not repurposed or pressured into performing activities outside their scope. Moreover, they are licensed and regulated by endorsing organizations like denominations.

SB 763 provides very little guidance to school boards. The legislation contains no requirements as to qualifications or oversight for chaplains, nor does it set out a clear, authoritative description of chaplain roles and responsibilities.

SB 763 authorizes school districts to use the School Safety Allotment to pay chaplains to do work for which they may have no training. For instance, it is not standard for chaplains to be competent in the provision of behavioral health services or suicide prevention.

Texas Impact equips people of faith and conscience with information, opportunities, and outreach tools to educate their communities and engage with lawmakers on pressing public policy issues.

**At a minimum, any school district considering the use of religious chaplains should have a publicly available policy related to qualifications and oversight, covering at least the criteria below:**

### **Qualifications:**

- definition of chaplain
- educational requirements
- religious ordination or commission
- clinical training and field requirements
- continuing education requirements, and
- requirement for multidisciplinary training in core competencies for that would be required of non-religious professionals doing the same work, such as mental health and career counseling.

### **Oversight:**

- requirement for a full background check under Subchapter F, Chapter 411, Government Code.
- requirement for parental consent before a chaplain talks to a child
- required training on HIPAA or other laws related to maintaining confidentiality of sensitive personal information requirement that chaplains have an endorsing organization
- requirement for standards of practice or a professional code of ethics
- accountability to an endorsing organization that provides oversight for non-criminal breaches of professionalism, or that maintains and shares that disciplinary history with a school
- provision that the chaplain be categorized as a school district employee so the public school may hire, supervise, and fire the chaplain

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