



## **Vote No on SB 1044/ HB 931 –Allowing Religious Chaplains in Public Schools**

**Chaplains have no place in public schools. Student support services must be provided by trained, certified school professionals, not government-selected volunteer clergy.**

### **Background**

SB 1044/ HB 931 would allow school districts and charter schools to adopt “a policy to authorize volunteer school chaplains to provide support, services, and programs to students as assigned by the district school board or charter school governing board.”

### **Chaplains are not trained or certified in providing student support services.**

Students are entitled to receive support services from school professionals trained for these roles and certified by the Department of Education. For example, school counselors must obtain certification from the Florida Department of Education, which requires them to have a master’s or higher degree with a graduate major in guidance and counseling or school counseling plus 600 hours of supervised internship experience working with school-aged children. **SB 1044/ HB 931 does not require volunteer chaplains to have any training, certification, or other professional credentials or qualifications relating to the provision of student support services.**

**Additionally, it appears that anyone can hold themselves out as a volunteer “chaplain,” as there does not appear to be any credentialing or certification required to become a volunteer chaplain in public schools in Florida. This creates significant risk of liability for school districts.**

### **Allowing school chaplains is likely to lead to unconstitutional religious coercion and promotion of religion.**

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. The fact that SB 1044/ HB 931 requires parental consent for a chaplain to provide services to a particular student does not relieve public schools, including any school chaplains, of their duty to refrain from promoting religion to students.

The primary role of chaplains is to provide pastoral or religious counseling to people in spiritual need. Allowing them to assume official positions—even if voluntary—in public schools will create an environment ripe for religious coercion and indoctrination of students. This is especially true under SB 1044/ HB 931, which does not require chaplains to obtain the same educational degrees and professional certifications that school counseling staff and other school staff must obtain. They are, therefore, not likely to have the training and experience necessary to ensure that they adhere to public schools’ educational mandates and avoid veering into impermissible religious counseling and other promotion of religion.

### **Parents and faith communities, not school chaplains, should provide religious guidance.**

Courts have upheld the constitutionality of government-provided chaplains only in very limited settings. Generally, the government may provide chaplains only where they are needed to accommodate the religious-exercise rights of people who would otherwise lack the capacity to access religious services—specifically, for those in prison, confined to a public hospital, or serving in the military. No such justification exists here. Public-school students have unfettered access to religious services in their communities and through their families. They do not need chaplains, selected by the government, to practice their faith.

Families and students in Florida practice a wide variety of faiths, and many are nonreligious. All should feel welcome in public schools. Freedom of religion means that parents and faith communities—not government officials—have the right to direct their children’s religious education and development. Allowing chaplains in public schools would cross these well-established boundaries.