

Testimony Opposing HB 2034 (Authorizing school districts to employ chaplains or accept such persons as volunteers.)

Submitted by: Ryan Tidball, BCC, ACPE

Chairwoman Estes, Vice Chairman McNorton, Ranking Member Stogsdill, Members of the Committee,

My name is Ryan Tidball, and I am a Humanist chaplain and a proud Kansan. I am certified as a chaplain by the Association of Professional Chaplains and am also a Certified Educator through the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, two of the most rigorous bodies that certify chaplains. I have served in adult and pediatric trauma centers. I currently oversee the yearlong post-graduate chaplain residency program at Wesley Medical Center in Wichita. I am immensely proud of the work I get to do each day to serve my community and I am here as a concerned member of that community.

Chaplains serve the religious and spiritual needs of all people in our care, regardless of their beliefs. It's a unique role, unfillable by others in the lives of the people we support at the time they need us. As a Humanist, I do not worship god, but I am trained and ready to support the needs of Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and of course, my fellow Humanists.

And we serve important roles. We provide emotional and spiritual support for patients and families when they do not have access to or trust in their church, synagogue, mosque, etc. We provide support at the time of death. In the midst of traumas, we accompany patients and family through shock and grief, and are often the first step in them making meaning of their experiences and connecting them to their spirituality. We partner with other members of the interdisciplinary team to ensure that patient and family values are key parts of the treatment plan.

Chaplains belong in a lot of spaces - we serve in hospitals, prisons, the military, and universities - anywhere people are deprived of their religious communities due to distance, incarceration, or medical necessity.

However, for all the spaces in which chaplains serve vital roles, we do not belong in America's public schools.

First, public school students in Kansas are in their religious communities. They come together in schools to learn math, science, and language arts, alongside tolerance, independence, kindness, and other life skills. But at the end of the school day, they return to their homes or go straight to their churches, synagogues, and religious communities for religious and moral instruction.

There are already ample opportunities in Kansas for students to receive moral and religious instruction throughout the day if their parents so choose through receiving a tax credit for private schools, homeschooling, and public school release time for religious instruction programs.

Simply put, public school students are in their religious communities, and any attempt to put chaplains in public schools lacks a basic understanding about the role of a chaplain.

Second, the secular skills and expertise chaplains bring to university, medical, correctional, and military institutions are—to say the least—redundant to the expertise already in our schools thanks to dedicated educators, school counselors, behavioral health therapists, school psychologists and others who care deeply for the welfare of their students. Much of my job is finding and communicating with family when there is a crisis. I provide emotional support and processing. We already pay people (and should pay people to ensure the best for our students) to meet these needs for our student population.

And any religious and spiritual skills or expertise chaplains would bring to schools would jeopardize the religious liberty of students and our secular public education system. Our job is to provide counsel, guided by each person's religious and moral beliefs; and provide pastoral care to help people more deeply connect with their spirituality, religion, and conscience. We support people as they find, struggle with and, sometimes, leave faith. When appropriate, hospital chaplains may pray with patients, baptise them, give them the eucharist or provide other important rituals. Chaplains may also guide a worship service or facilitate Friday Jumma prayers. These are the responsibilities of any trained and qualified chaplain. But to do any of this in a public school should make every parent deeply uncomfortable.

Furthermore, to do this without evangelizing or projecting the chaplain's own spirituality onto the student takes years of training. Something that most congregational leaders cannot do, let alone volunteers off the street cannot do. This is why the major hospitals in town do not let volunteers walk around and be "chaplains." They hire well trained chaplains.

Third, optics matter. I am a visible presence at Wesley Medical Center, and normally a welcome one. But to put chaplains in public schools, walking around the halls, sitting in the cafeteria would do far more harm than good. I am here to serve, I'm here to be a respite and a source of comfort - but putting me or other chaplains in schools would have the opposite effect. It would be a disservice to the religious rights of many students. The Jewish, Humanist, Muslim, atheist, or Hindu, and yes the Christian student, along with the LGBTQIA+ student, will feel uncomfortable because their school is no longer what it was promised to be - a space free from religious influence. A space where sure, they may debate religion with their peers, but not one where the adults in the building are there for a religious purpose. Because that's what chaplains are - we serve a religious purpose.

Children are uniquely susceptible to influence, especially from their peers. Chaplains in the school will create a coercive environment.

But, regardless of the coercion concerns and the bill's misunderstanding of the role of a chaplain, the sponsors of this bill purport that it will support students' mental health and safety.

If this bill's sponsors were serious about supporting the mental health needs of students, they would be taking this crisis seriously and investing in evidence-based solutions. And it is a crisis: according to 2025 Kansas Communities that Care (KCTC) survey data, more than 30% of students surveyed had experienced symptoms of depression, and nearly 30% of students surveyed had at some point seriously considered killing themselves¹.

¹ <https://results.kctcdata.org/Home/StudentSurvey?SurveyType=KCTC&CodeSelection=CTY&countyId=30120-0&categoryId=-999>

It's time to fully invest in what works: school counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Kansas' student-to-school-counselor ratio is 372:1, even though the recommended ratio is 250:1². The recommended student-to-school-psychologist ratio is 500:1; Kansas' average ratio is 1,069:1³. And the recommended student-to-school-social-worker ratio is 1,360:1, when it should be a maximum of 250:1⁴.

But, respectfully, that's not what we're considering today. Instead, we're debating whether school districts should decide whether or not to allow spiritual leaders into our kids' secular public schools. Because this bill isn't about students' mental health, it is an attempt to erode the secular public education that Kansas' families depend on.

And as a person who has spent my life dedicated to supporting the religious and spiritual needs of our community, I resoundingly urge the committee to protect the religious freedom of our students - and reject this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Ryan Tidball
Humanist Chaplain

² <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/Careers-in-School-Counseling/State-Requirements-Programs>

³ <https://kaosp.wildapricot.org/school-psychologist-shortages>

⁴ <https://www.sswaa.org/national-census>