

Texas Lawmakers Vote to Allow Chaplains in Public Schools to Combat Mental Health Crisis

The Texas Legislature has passed a measure that would allow public schools to hire chaplains in addition to school counselors.

To be eligible for the program, all chaplains will need to be endorsed by an organization recognized by the United States Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Religion News Service (RNS) reports a version of the bill already sailed through the state Senate last month, and the Texas House passed an amended version on Tuesday evening (May 9) in a vote that appeared to fall largely along party lines, with 89 voting in favor and 58 opposed.

State Rep. Cole Hefner (R-Mount Pleasant) told The Dallas Morning News the legislation is about giving school districts “every tool that we can in the toolbox” to combat mental health problems and other crises. He rejected Democrats’ amendments to require parental consent and that schools provide a representative of every denomination.

According to the outlet, Texas faces a shortage of qualified mental health professionals to work in schools. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students to every counselor. In Texas, it was 392-to-1, according to 2021 data.

Critics of the move are complaining it will lead to Christian influence in state schools. “This is certainly moving towards

a preferred faith in Texas, which is something that is deeply concerning,” Joshua Houston, advocacy director for the interfaith group Texas Impact, told The Morning News.

State Rep. Gene Wu (D-District 137) tried to bar schools from using public funds to pay the chaplains. “We should not use public monies to compensate religious services,” Wu said.

But National School Chaplain Association CEO Rocky Malloy responded directly to all of the criticism during his committee testimony last month. Malloy believes the bill will increase school safety and will not intrude on students’ religious beliefs, according to the RNS.

“Chaplains operate within an individual’s belief and convictions—they are not working to convert people to religion,” he said. As noted earlier, the chaplains must be endorsed by an official government agency that requires that type of training.

During the House debate, state Rep. Hefner was also asked about his refusal to amend the bill to bar proselytizing, RNS reports.

He argued chaplains are already trained to avoid proselytizing. Hefner also noted that people of any faith can become chaplains and insisted he did not want people “forcing their religion” on others—including his own children.

“This is just to help supplement and complement our counselors in doing the job that (are) working really hard,” he said.

The bill will require school boards to vote on whether to hire chaplains, according to the RNS. It also forbids registered sex offenders from serving as chaplains and requires background checks for all applicants. {eo}

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