



**Testimony in OPPOSITION of
Senate Bill 612: County Boards of Education – Volunteer Aides – School Chaplain**

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Unfavorable

February 23, 2024

Strong Schools Maryland is a network of education advocates dedicated to ensuring the full funding and faithful implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, – we advocate, build power, and share resources with invested Maryland residents to co-create strong public schools. **Strong Schools Maryland stands in opposition to Senate Bill 612**, which authorizes each county board of education to use chaplains as volunteer aides in schools to provide support services to students.

With the passage of the Blueprint, Maryland committed to hiring diverse and highly qualified teachers and administrators recognizing that the state is growing increasingly diverse, not only in terms of race, but also in other aspects, such as religion and spiritual beliefs. Allowing chaplains as volunteer aides would not serve our diverse student population, and could potentially cause harm to certain student groups. Simply put, this bill violates the fundamental tenet of separation of church and state.

Senate Bill 612:

- Fails to recognize the growing population of students of diverse faiths, particularly religious minorities. The proposed legislation offers no guidance about what a chaplain could or could not say to a student, specifically about religion – there is no requirement in this law that the chaplains refrain from proselytizing while at schools or that they serve students from different religious background; and
- Asserts government authority over the spiritual development and formation of our public school children. Spiritual and religious care must be provided with consent. With students, parental consent is necessary. Chaplains serving in public schools are likely to bring about conflict with the religious beliefs of parents.

Chaplains often are strong pillars of Maryland communities and students will continue to have access to the services and resources they provide, outside of school.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 612.

For more information, contact Riya Gupta at riya@strongschoolsmaryland.org