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March 06, 2025

HB 1395 - UNF

County Boards of Education - Volunteer Aides - School Chaplain

Dear Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Vice-Chair Jheanelle K. Wilkins, Bonnie, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Chaplains are inclined to view the world through the lens of a religion, or a subset of religions, and a god, or a subset of gods, a view inapposite to nonbelievers. Claims that someone is “in a better place”, that god “works in mysterious ways”, etc., may be a bedrock of religious consolation, but tend to be meaningless, or misdirected and misplaced, to nonbelievers. Chaplains, whose career training is often provided from within a particular religious perspective, are unlikely to set aside their religion in order to assist a nonbeliever, and may either be unwilling or unable to do so.

Licensed therapists who have certifications in counseling can be employed by the school districts to assist students, serving all students, including the students who are not Christians or who are irreligious. Thirty- seven percent of Americans are non-Christians, including nearly thirty percent who now identify as religiously unaffiliated. Public schools serve all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof. Students should not be asked to align their beliefs to the beliefs of a chaplain because the school district employs a chaplain who was trained to utilize particular religious beliefs when providing counseling. Allowing someone who is equipped to handle the needs of some employees and community members to act as an official chaplain for the school alienates those who do not believe in “the Savior”, or a “Higher Power”, who functions as a celestial judge.

Paid or voluntary, the chaplains under this bill will be selected, and thusly sponsored, by the school districts. Our Constitution’s Establishment Clause—which protects Americans’ religious freedom by ensuring the continued separation of religion and government—dictates that the government avoid assuming a role of favoring some religious beliefs over competing beliefs. As the Supreme Court has stated, “the First

Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” [McCreary Cty. v. ACLU, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); Epperson v. Arkansas, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947)].

We are a diverse community with ample opportunities for people of various faiths to seek support from the clergy they themselves choose. School districts should provide secular support services and leave decisions to seek religious support, or to deny and reject religious beliefs as being false, to individuals. School districts should separate their mission from religion to respect the beliefs of all, including those whose beliefs dissent from locally commonly held religious beliefs. This bill merits a no vote.

Respectfully,
Mathew Goldstein
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