

The Washington Area Secular Humanists, Inc.

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January 16, 2026

The Honorable Del. Jheanelle K. Wilkins
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
6 Bladen St.
Annapolis, Maryland 21404

Re: OPPOSE HB24: County Boards of Education - Volunteer Aides - School Chaplain

Dear Chairperson Wilkins and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

As a representative of the Washington Area Secular Humanists (WASH), American Atheists, and a Maryland resident, I write in opposition to HB24 currently before the committee.

WASH is a regional educational and community service organization incorporated in Maryland representing non-religious persons. WASH is also an affiliate of the national civil rights organization American Atheists, which also opposes this bill.

HB24, like similar bills being introduced in other states, would permit aides representing religious denominations to act as volunteer chaplains in our public schools. This would be a direct affront to our state's and our nation's long tradition of separation of church and state. Furthermore, these chaplains would not be required to have any of the extensive training or certifications normally required of school counselors. Allowing unvetted and potentially unqualified persons access to impressionable and vulnerable school children would be reckless. Inevitably, religious chaplains would be strongly motivated to proselytize their religion as much as provide some sort of counseling services. This is probably the real if unspoken motivation of the bill's supporters.

Although not explicitly stated in the proposed legislation, the expectation is that these would be primarily or exclusively Christian chaplains. Maryland is a religiously diverse state. Marylanders practice many different religions and many practice none at all. And Christianity itself is made up of many different denominations which often disagree strongly with each other on matters of doctrine and the role that religion should have in our society. Students in our public schools of all faiths and of none need to feel included and represented in all aspects of their education. Having chaplains would alienate those who do not share the faith of the chaplain. This bill would place public schools in a no-win situation where they would need to accept chaplains from *all* religious and non-religious backgrounds thereby opening themselves up to complaints from parents and the community when a chaplain from a disfavored religious background is approved and potentially waste taxpayer dollars on extensive litigation. For these reasons and for many others, our public schools, like our government, must maintain a position of strict neutrality on all matters of religion.

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Many Christian fundamentalists, although certainly not all, mistakenly believe that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. This is simply not true. There is no mention of Christianity anywhere in the US Constitution. In fact, religion is mentioned only twice, in Article VI and in the First Amendment. Both of these clauses prohibit religious tests and requirements from government business. Many also mistakenly believe that religious faith produces a more peaceful and harmonious society and use this as an argument for incorporating their religion into public schools. There is no evidence whatsoever that supports this. Atheists, agnostics, and others not connected with a religion are every bit as moral, peaceful, lawabiding, and compassionate as their religious compatriots. Sometimes more so.

HB24 would divide our community and alienate school children who do not share the religion of their schools' chaplains. Making access to these chaplains optional would not be sufficient. Children are highly susceptible to coercion and peer pressure. Many would feel compelled to participate in religious counseling from fear of social exclusion even if they and their parents do not share the faith of the chaplain.

Maryland does not need this bill and our schools would be the worse for it were it to become law. I urge the House Ways and Means Committee to reject this bad bill.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Reid

Michael R. Reid

The Washington Area Secular Humanists and
Maryland State Director for American Atheists