

Chaplains debate escalates school board culture wars

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HOUSTON (RNS)—Seven months after the Texas Legislature passed a bill allowing public schools to hire school chaplains, Dave Welch’s work has just begun.

The longtime conservative Christian activist has a two-pronged plan for what comes next.

“Number one is winning over the leaders currently in the school system, the school boards—or changing them,” said Welch, who runs the Houston Area Pastor Council. “Number two is persuading and winning over enough pastors to see this as a mission field.”

Strident rhetoric is nothing new from Welch, a seasoned veteran of the culture wars who was once a national field director for the Christian Coalition, a conservative advocacy group.

It also echoes the messaging of the National School Chaplain Association, the activist group that helped push SB 763—the controversial school chaplains bill—through the Texas Legislature earlier this year and now is primed for a nationwide push.

“As NSCA officers engage state legislators we are energized to know that this school chaplaincy bill will pave the way for spiritual care, support, and biblical guidance for children, teachers and staff in public schools throughout many states,” read an email to NSCA supporters, according to the *Texas Tribune*.

War of words waging in school boards

But the idea that public schools could turn into spaces of overt religious recruitment has worried church and state separationists across the Lone Star State ever since Gov. Greg Abbott signed the bill into law.

Despite objections from outnumbered Democrats in both chambers of the Legislature, the chaplains bill was approved without outlining a chaplain's role or mandating any specific training requirements.

Instead, lawmakers required the state's 1,200-plus school districts to define those details themselves as they each vote on whether to allow chaplains in their schools by March 2024.

The result has been a heated war of words waged in one of America's most well-trodden political battlegrounds—school boards.

According to locals, the fight over school chaplains has tapped into ongoing power struggles over public education and has pit religious voices against each other, with supporters framing the policy as a way to assist student mental health and detractors blasting it as a Christian nationalist attempt to convert children to a specific form of faith.

To Cameron Samuels, a 2022 graduate from a school in the Katy Independent School District, the chaplains debate is part of a broader faith-fueled fight over local education that began in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Samuels asserts early conservative pushback against mask mandates slowly transitioned into other political efforts, such as opposition to critical race theory, an academic ideology that became a target of conservative ire in 2021.

Social conservative influence on boards

The trend eventually snowballed, opening the floodgates for an influx of conservative voices on school boards statewide, said Samuels, who heads the activist group Students Engaged in Advancing Texas.



Victor Perez (Photo courtesy of Katy ISD)

Samuels recalled attending a November 2021 Katy ISD school board meeting in which Victor Perez approached the microphone to rail against CRT, decrying it as “a fundamentally racist worldview.”

A few months later, Perez, after endorsements from local Christian magazines, was elected to the Katy ISD board, which he now leads as president.

A year later, three more conservative candidates backed by Texans for Educational Freedom—a conservative PAC dedicated to opposing critical race theory and “other anti-American agendas”—were elected to the seven-member board.

Formed in 2021, Texans for Educational Freedom already has spent more

than \$500,000 on school board races across the state, often running negative ads against opponents, part of what a recent *Texas Observer* investigation concluded was a broader push by a constellation of conservative PACs to impact Texas school boards.

“We’re seeing a Christian nationalist extremism takeover of our school district because of these interest groups,” Samuels said, noting a measure the Katy ISD board passed in August that requires school staff to inform parents if their children identify as transgender or choose to use different pronouns at school.

During a debate over that measure, Amy Thieme, one of the PAC-backed board members, suggested schools could enlist chaplains—which the board has yet to approve—as a mediator to inform parents.

“This is one avenue that we could use,” Thieme said.

Pushing back against the religious right

But some Texans have begun to push back, with the new chaplains bill serving as a galvanizing force. Three hours away, in an area encompassed by San Antonio’s North East ISD, Cameron Vickrey, a Cooperative Baptist minister who works for Fellowship Southwest, is one of several parents who have spoken out against chaplains in their children’s schools.



Cameron Vickrey (RNS photo/Jack Jenkins)

“It just baffles me that it feels like a good idea to anybody,” said Vickrey, who has three children in North East ISD. “It feels to me like an infiltration of the religious right—the conservative, Christian religious right —into our public schools, which is a trend we’ve been seeing in almost every area.

“I would absolutely call all of this Christian nationalism,” she added, noting her church recently hosted a panel for Americans United for Separation of Church and State that included discussions of the chaplains bill.

The sentiment is shared by Lisa Epstein, who heads the public affairs arm of the Jewish Federation of San Antonio.

She said her umbrella organization, the Jewish Community Relations Council, has been fighting the chaplains proposal ever since it appeared alongside a slate of religion-related bills at the Legislature. They include efforts to mandate the display of the Ten Commandments in public schools and to require campuses to set aside time for staff and students to pray and read religious texts.

When the chaplains bill passed, Epstein said, her group organized Zoom

discussions with members across the state, detailing the bill she and others see as negatively impacting Jewish students.

“Our community members,” she said, have been “absolutely appalled that the school districts would even consider doing this.”

And while supporters have pointed out that chaplains could be from any faith, Epstein said her group opposes all public school chaplains on principle, whether Christian, Jewish or otherwise.

“From the Jewish perspective, we feel like public school should be a place where kids of all sorts of religions are welcome,” she said. “If you feel like your child needs clergy to counsel them, there are so many clergy in town—and frankly, that’s up to the parent to make that decision.”

Pushback has increased over the past few months, as more school districts vote on the school chaplains measure. In August, more than 100 Texas chaplains—professionals who work in the military or in health care—[signed a letter](#) organized by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and others decrying the idea of chaplains in public classrooms, arguing it could be “harmful” to students.

A number have appeared at school board meetings to testify against the policy. The issue has also sparked heated debates among board members—with at least one resigning mid-debate over the chaplains policy in early December.

Acceptance of school chaplains subdued

But if conservative Christian advocates envisioned a sweeping embrace of school chaplains across Texas, the reality has been more subdued. While some districts have endorsed the idea of paid school chaplains, many have

rejected it outright. Others have approved chaplains to serve area schools in a limited volunteer capacity.

Katy ISD board members had a preliminary discussion of the bill earlier this month, and while some of the PAC-backed members still seemed supportive of the measure, other board members made faith-based arguments against the bill.

“As a mom, I don’t want a chaplain who doesn’t speak and know and study my faith,” said board member Rebecca Fox, whose official bio lists her as volunteering at Second Baptist Church nearby.

Perez, the board president, also appeared concerned about the work crafting a full-throated chaplains policy would entail.

“The board has to really, from scratch, create the policy,” he said. “It’s going to take a lot of work over the next few months if we go forward with it.”

Even Welch, who participated in an NCSA event hosted at a Houston-area church celebrating the passage of the chaplains bill, said he is uncomfortable with the idea of chaplains initiating a religious conversation with students.

But Welch, who rejects the term “Christian nationalist” in favor of “Christian patriot,” said if a student pursues “the spiritual side” of a conversation with a school chaplain, “the chaplain should not be hindered from providing that to them—and that’s what this whole program can do.”

With the March deadline looming, locals opposed to the measure are increasingly anxious about the fallout. Vickrey said she expected North East ISD to ultimately oppose school chaplains, but the division will remain.

“I’ve always had so much faith in our school board, and now it feels like

there's no agreement," she said. "It makes me a little bit more concerned about our direction—it's been so tense."

Vickrey misses the debates of just a few years ago, she said, when school funding was the topic of the day.

"Now I just feel like those issues are so low on the priority list, and it's all culture wars and Christian nationalism," she said.