

Legislature passes bill allowing chaplains in public schools

May 11, 2023

WASHINGTON (RNS)—The Texas Legislature passed a bill that would allow schools to employ chaplains in addition to school counselors, with Republicans overriding objections by Democrats to send the proposal to the governor's desk.

The bill will permit school districts to hire chaplains who, unlike school counselors, are not required to be certified by the State Board for Educator Certification.

A version of the bill already sailed through the state Senate last month, and the Texas House passed an amended version May 9 in a vote that appeared to fall largely along party lines, with 89 voting in favor and 58 opposed.

Conservative groups such as Texas Values Action have voiced support for the bill, and the National School Chaplain Association, an arm of the Christian group Mission Generation, testified in support during committee meetings last month.

Rocky Malloy, head of the NSCA, argued during his testimony the bill would increase school safety and not infringe on the religious beliefs of students, saying, "Chaplains operate within an individual's belief and convictions. They are not working to convert people to religion."

Eroding separation of church and

state

But Malloy's organization has suggested otherwise in the past, and critics of the bill argue it could lead to proselytization and erode the separation of church and state.

"I worry that this bill will lead to Christian nationalists infiltrating our public schools and indoctrinating our students," Democratic Rep. James Talarico, a Presbyterian seminarian, told Religion News Service.

Texas Senate Democrats made similar arguments during debate over the bill last month, and multiple Democratic House members made efforts to amend it—with mixed results.

Talarico sought to bar chaplains from proselytizing and require parental consent before meeting with students, and Rep. Toni Rose sought to limit the bill to schools in counties with populations of less than 150,000.

Separately, Rep. Gene Wu attempted to bar the use of public funds and require schools to provide a religious leader of a different faith for students who request them.

All of those efforts failed, although lawmakers did amend the bill to prohibit registered sex offenders from serving as chaplains, to institute background checks and to require those serving in the role 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.

Imelda Mejia, a spokesperson for Texas Freedom Network, which has been critical of the bill, expressed concern about the influence of the NSCA. The website for the group's parent organization, Mission Generation, recently began redirecting to the NSCA's website, but archived versions from last year listed a desire to "influence those in education until the saving grace

of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with him.”

In another archived version of the website, Mission Generation boasts it has “developed a viable approach of reaching the largest unreached people group inside of the public schools around the world ... Where many have declared it impossible to deliver the Good News, many attempts to do so have failed, and very few organizations are trying; Mission Generation, with God’s help, has made record-breaking progress.”

Mission Generation appears to have allies in the Texas government: In a video posted to the group’s Instagram account in October, Julie Pickren, who sits on the NSCA’s board, is seen giving a speech in which she appears to celebrate the idea of chaplains proselytizing to children.

“There are children who need chaplains. For the pastors in here, you already know: We have a whole generation of children that have never stepped foot one day inside of a church,” said Pickren, who went on to be elected to the State Board of Education in November.

The NSCA came up during debate over the bill. After Rep. Gina Hinojosa pressed the chief sponsor of the bill in the House, Rep. Cole Hefner, about his refusal to amend the bill to bar proselytizing, Talarico noted NSCA’s support and asked his Republican colleague if he shared the group’s goals.

In responses to both lawmakers, Hefner resisted efforts to ban proselytizing, arguing chaplains are already trained to avoid such practices. He 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,” Hefner said.

However, Mejia noted several bills introduced since 2013 that could increase the number of state counselors or offer them additional support. At least three bills related to school counselors are languishing in committee.

“You can see where their desires lay, and I don’t think it was giving our students what they needed,” she said.

Hefner and Mayes Middleton, the state senator who authored the original Senate version of the bill, did not respond to requests for comment about the bill or its passage.

Inviting political controversy

The bill will require school boards to vote on whether to hire chaplains, but critics argue such votes will invite the kind of political controversy seen at school board meetings across the country over the past year.

Pickren appeared to reference such activism in her October speech while encouraging people to pressure local education officials.

“We have seen this all over America, that moms and dads showing up to school board meetings are shifting the course of education in America,” she said. “Go to your school board meetings, ask your school boards to put chaplains in their schools. Ask them to put a chaplain on every campus. Email your school board members, email your superintendent, email and call your local elected officials.”

The bill is one of a trio of proposals making their way through the Texas Legislature that focus on religion and public schools. Critics have argued that some of the bills, which include requiring schools to hang a version of the Ten Commandments, privilege a specific form of conservative Christianity.

“I see this as part of a troubling trend across the country of Christian nationalists attempting to take over our democracy and attempting to take over my religion—both of which I find deeply offensive,” Talarico said.