



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

February 18, 2025

The Honorable Rep. Skyler Wheeler  
Chair, House Education Committee  
1007 E. Grand Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50319

**Re: OPPOSE HF 334, Allowing Chaplains in Public Schools**

Dear Chairperson Wheeler and Members of the House Education Committee:

As an Iowa resident and Director of Strategic Communications & Policy Engagement for American Atheists, I write in opposition to HF 334, a bill that would, with minimal requirements, allow chaplains into public schools to serve in roles typically reserved for professionally qualified school counselors. This bill would undermine the religious equality of all Iowa residents by subjecting students of nonsectarian public schools to religious coercion and interfering with parents' fundamental right to direct the upbringing of their children. On behalf of American Atheists members across the state of Iowa, I strongly urge you to reject this unconstitutional bill.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the "wall of separation" between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheists are accepted as members of our nation's communities and where bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building, and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that no young person should be subject to religious coercion by the government.

HF 334 would allow chaplains to serve in support roles for students in public schools in place of or alongside actually qualified school counselors. We recognize there is an ongoing school counselor shortage throughout the country, including in Iowa. However, allowing school chaplains to volunteer in schools is both an inappropriate and inadequate alternative to resolving this crisis.

**AMERICAN ATHEISTS**

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Allowing school chaplains access to public school students violates one of our nation's founding principles: Religion and the government should remain in separate spheres to ensure all Americans' religious beliefs are respected. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment requires that the government not favor one religion over another or favor religious belief over nonbelief. This constitutional guardrail is especially critical when children are involved, as they are particularly vulnerable to religious coercion within educational settings.<sup>1</sup> Bills such as HF 334 carve out a space for religion within one of the nation's and our state's most important institutions – publicly funded, nonsectarian schools – and create an impermissible risk that students' religious freedom will be violated.

Even if students are not compelled to interact with chaplains against their will, the presence of religious authority figures at school inherently fosters an environment in which religious coercion can flourish. Students may feel pressured by their peers to meet with the chaplain. Even more concerning, they may view the presence of a chaplain as a government endorsement of that chaplain's religious beliefs and therefore feel pressure to conform their beliefs to those that their school or state appears to support. Growing up is challenging enough, and schools must be a space of safe expression for all students – not just those who adhere to particular favored religious beliefs. Lawmakers supporting this bill must ask themselves whether they would continue to support HF 334 if their child attended a school district where the only source of support was not a qualified counselor but a chaplain of a different faith.

HF 334 would also interfere with parents' fundamental right to choose how their children are raised by allowing chaplains to proselytize to students under the guise of providing support. This bill does not require parental consent before chaplains interact with students; explicitly prohibit chaplains from using their position as an evangelizing opportunity; or otherwise mandate that chaplains respect the diverse religious backgrounds of the students in Iowa's public schools. Instead, the chaplains would have the ability to undermine parents' choices by directly influencing students' religious beliefs.

Public education is the bedrock of our pluralistic democracy, a place where students can go to learn no matter their background, beliefs, or nonbelief. If Iowa parents want their children to receive an education influenced by a particular religious tradition, they may choose to send their children to private school or homeschool them.<sup>2</sup> Chaplains must not, however, be permitted to insert their personal religious beliefs into nonsectarian schools that are required to serve all children.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Everson v. Bd. of Educ.*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421, 429-33 (1962); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 216 (1963); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968).

<sup>2</sup> *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390, 400 (1923).

School chaplains are also not qualified to provide the same types of support as school counselors. School counselors play multiple important roles within public schools, and they provide varying forms of support such as academic, professional, mental, and emotional support to help prepare students beyond their postsecondary career.<sup>3</sup> Becoming a school counselor takes significant training. At minimum, school counselors must hold a master's degree in school counseling. In addition, counselors must meet the state certification and licensure standards while fulfilling the continuing education requirements and upholding ethical and professional standards. HF 334 would allow chaplains to serve in place of school counselors despite their lack of qualifications and immunity from professional standards. This threatens to negatively impact student outcomes and needlessly undermines the efforts and extensive training required of counselors.

A chaplain's commitment to their particular religion does not qualify them to serve students, each and every one of whom has distinct needs, backgrounds, and experiences that must be met with extensive training and experience. A multi-state study showed that comprehensive, data-driven school counseling programs improve a range of student learning and behavioral outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, research has shown that student-to-school counselor ratios that meet the American School Counselor Association recommendation in poverty-stricken schools have been linked to improved academic outcomes such as increased attendance, fewer disciplinary incidents, and higher graduation rates.<sup>5</sup> Finally, school counselors can effectively assist underachieving students by examining school-wide data and use the data to host an effective group intervention.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of seeking to give chaplains volunteer roles in public schools, the Iowa legislature should work to provide additional funding so that schools can employ school counselors equipped with the professional skills needed to assist students in their academic, vocational, and personal success.

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<sup>3</sup> American School Counselor Association. *The role of the school counselor*. Available at: [https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/ee8b2e1b-d021-4575-982c-c84402cb2cd2/Role-State ment.pdf](https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/ee8b2e1b-d021-4575-982c-c84402cb2cd2/Role-State%20ment.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Carey, J., & Dimmitt, C. (2012). School counseling and student outcomes: Summary of six statewide studies. *Professional School Counseling*, 16 (2), 146-153. doi: 10.1177/2156759X0001600204

<sup>5</sup> Lapan, R. T., Gysbers, N. C., Stanley, B., & Pierce, M. E. (2012). Missouri Professional School Counselors: Ratios Matter, Especially in High-Poverty Schools. *Professional School Counseling*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X0001600207>.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, C. (2013). Bringing out the Brilliance: A counseling intervention for underachieving students. *Professional School Counseling*, 17 (1), 86-96. doi: 10.1177/2156759X000170012; Bruce, A. M., Getch, Y. Q., & Ziomek-Daigle, J. (2009). Closing the gap: A group counseling approach to improve test performance of African-American students. *Professional School Counseling*, 12 (6), 450-457. doi: 10.1177/2156759X0901200603

Iowa's public schools must be safe and supportive learning environments for all students, and lawmakers should prioritize protecting — not violating — Iowans' constitutional right to religious freedom. We strongly urge you to reject this bill.

Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists' opposition to HF 334, please contact Victoria Anderson, State Policy Counsel, at [vanderson@atheists.org](mailto:vanderson@atheists.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melina Cohen".

Melina Cohen  
Director of Strategic Communications & Policy Engagement  
American Atheists