



## The New Chaplain Law: S.B. 763

On June 18th, 2023, Governor Greg Abbott signed a bill into law ([SB 763](#)) that allows public school districts to hire or accept as volunteers school chaplains to provide “support, services, and programs for students.”

Under this law, chaplains could serve as students’ first point of contact for mental health support, suicide prevention, and other behavioral health services — even though they are not required to have any type of training or certification. Nor are there appropriate screening and safety standards to protect children and prevent child abuse.

Also under this law, chaplains don’t need to meet any training or certification requirements and won’t necessarily be equipped to provide behavioral and mental health support and suicide prevention. Meanwhile, Texas school counselors are required to have a master’s degree, two years’ teaching experience, pass a certification exam, and complete the state’s school counselor preparation program before they are allowed to provide any services to students.

## This Toolkit

This new law requires all public school districts to vote on whether they will allow unregulated chaplains to provide services to students by March 1st, 2024. Whether you’re a parent, teacher, faith leader, advocate, concerned community member, or a student yourself, read on for resources to help you oppose this law and advocate for the education and civil rights of all. Important note: This document is a version, shortened by the ACLU of Texas, of the complete toolkit which can be [accessed here](#).

## Ways You Can Take Action

- [Contact School Board Members or Speak at a School Board Meeting](#)
- [Write a Letter to the Editor or Op-ed](#)
- [Collect Petition Signatures](#)
- [Organize Protests or Rallies](#)
- [How to Talk About the Chaplain Policy](#)

## Contact School Board Members or Speak at a School Board Meeting

Every district in Texas has a school board that makes decisions on important education issues, including whether to allow chaplains in your schools. Under S.B. 763, all public school districts must vote on whether they will allow unregulated chaplains to provide services to students by March 1, 2024.

Contacting school board members is a great way to show them that the community cares about this issue and propose that the board take appropriate action. You can contact school board members via:

- Email
- Call
- A letter

You can also testify at a school board meeting. This is a powerful way to voice your opposition against the chaplain policy and register your official stance on the public record. To know how your district announces school board meetings, check its website. Then, look at upcoming meeting agendas to find out when your Board will be discussing whether to bring in chaplains (such agenda items may say “discuss bill number SB 763” or “Section 23.001 of the Texas Education Code”).

Finally, make sure to check whether your district has any special policies on speaking before the Board. Some districts require speakers to sign up in advance.

When writing a call script, email, letter to a board member, or preparing to speak at a school board meeting, follow this outline:

1. **Introduce Yourself:** Who are you? Are you a parent\relative, current, or former student\educator?
2. **State Your Stance on the Chaplain law:** Why are you testifying?
3. **Why is this issue important to you and your community?** In what ways does this issue or bill disproportionately affect you and your community?
4. **The Ask:** I ask that you put students first and vote against the adoption of the Chaplain law in our school district.
5. **Close:** Thank them for their time.

## Email, Call, Testimony: Script Example

Dear Trustee (Last name),

### **Introduce Yourself-**

*EXAMPLE:*

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am a [parent\relative, student, educator, person of faith, community member] in [school district, city].*

### **State Your Stance on the Chaplain Policy-**

*EXAMPLE:*

*I am contacting you today to urge board members to vote against the adoption of the chaplain policy during next week's vote.*

### **Why is this issue important to you and your community?-**

*EXAMPLE:*

*As a queer student who doesn't have access to an advisor who can guide me outside of my home, chaplains entering my school and acting as an advisor make me and my friends uncomfortable. I worry I will not be able to receive the same level of counseling from a chaplain.*

*EXAMPLE:*

*Jewish students are a religious minority in Texas - and the rejected amendments make it clear that this law is not intended to provide adequate support or care for religious minorities. Instead, it's making it so mental health support in a school could come from someone whose goal is to convert rather than to provide help.*

### **The Ask:**

*EXAMPLE:*

*I ask that you protect students' religious freedom and vote against adopting the chaplain policy in our school district. Public schools should be places where students of all faiths and none are respected and are prepared to thrive in our diverse state, not where the government takes over religious instruction.*

### **Close -**

*EXAMPLE:*

*Thank you for taking the time to [read my letter/ answer my call]. I hope you will keep my words in mind when voting.*

Sincerely,  
(Full name)  
(Address)  
(Phone number)

## Write a Letter to the Editor or Op-ed

Writing and sending letters to your local newspaper is a powerful way to let elected officials know where the public stands on issues that affect the community. Access your local paper's word limits and submission instructions on their website. When writing, follow the below outlines.

### Letter to the editor outline:

- Cite the article you are responding to
- State your position
- Tell your story
- State a few statistics or facts about the issue, and conclude with your call to action.  
*See a sample template [here](#).*

### Op-ed outline:

- Catch the reader's attention
- State your position
- Offer evidence that backs up your opinion. This can be:
  - Personal stories
  - Quotes from reputable sources
  - Statistics/studies
  - Scripture
  - [Texas chaplains' opposition to the policy](#)
  - [ACLU of Texas and other organizations' letter of opposition to the policy](#)
- Call to action: Ask readers to make sure school board members hear from them
- Kicker: End with a final piece of evidence, vision for the future, or circle back to your argument  
*See published op-eds opposing the chaplain policy [here](#) and [here](#).*

After submitting your letter or op-ed, call the paper to make sure they received it. This will help bump your letter up in the line. Continually check the paper to know whether your letter is published. If it is, share it on social media to reach even more community members.

**Took action? Report back [here](#).**

## **Collect Petition Signatures**

Petitions create public support by encouraging conversations within your community and building relationships with supporters who you can take action with in other ways.

### **How to Create a Petition**

Include important key points in your petition: Who you are petitioning, space for signees names, contact information, and where they live to show they are a constituent of your school district.

### **Recruit Volunteers**

This can help increase your efforts and create a stronger community of advocates.

### **Choose a location to collect signatures**

Your local public libraries, grocery stores, community college campuses, or other high-traffic public areas in your school district are all good options. You can also collect petitions by going to public events like county fairs or going door-to-door canvassing.

### **Prepare your materials**

Print and bring multiple blank petition sheets, pens, clipboards, and any information about the chaplain law that you want to hand out (keep it simple).

### **Train volunteers**

Before heading out to collect signatures, provide a group training to ensure people understand the implications of the chaplain law and how to connect with others.

1. **Give context:** Why are you collecting petition signatures today? Why is this important? How does collecting signatures help your cause?
2. **Give tips** on how to be successful at collecting petitions, like:
  - Be friendly. A big wave and smile will increase the number of people who stop to sign your petition!
  - Make a strong, direct ask like: “Hi, can you sign a petition to oppose chaplains in our public schools?”
  - Make sure to get complete contact information. Collecting signatures can build a list of community members who are with us and that we can contact later on to get involved. Ask for people’s phone and email if they don’t initially write it down.
3. **Review** any materials that may be useful for volunteers.

4. **Practice:** Have volunteers practice the script you're using, if any, or just practice stopping people, asking them to sign petitions, and carrying a conversation about the topic.

### **During Your Event**

Take pictures to share on social media to spread the word. Post them later as a way to publicly thank your volunteers, and tag local organizations like the ACLU of Texas, Texas Freedom Network, Texas Impact, Interfaith Alliance, and Baptist Joint Committee, so we can show off all the good work you are doing!

### **After Your Event**

Collect your materials and debrief with your volunteers. Make sure to get all the signed petition sheets back. Ask your volunteers how their experience was. Remind everyone how important their work today was, and thank everyone.

### **Turn in Your Petitions to Decision-Makers**

When you're ready to drop off of your petitions, organize a petition drop-off.

## Organize Protests and Rallies

Protests and rallies apply public pressure and generate attention.

### Organizing the Protest or Rally

**Pick a time, date, and location** that's symbolically significant. For example, your school district's administrative building. The best protests are short and high-energy, so don't plan for your event to run for longer than an hour and keep the number of speakers between 2 and 4.

**Recruit attendees.** Post your event on friendly parent groups, share it on social media, invite your friends and family, post flyers in public places, etc. You can also identify other stakeholders (community groups, orgs, etc.) who share your cause, and reach out to them.

**Make signs.** Remember that any sign you make could end up in the news, so make sure the message is simple and clear. Making signs is a great activity for a group meeting before your protest. Print out chant and/or song sheets to keep the crowd energized.

**Invite the press.** Including local, state, and national affiliates of media outlets and newspapers. Tell them the exact protest time and the reason for the protest. Appoint a press lead for your group to coordinate communication with the press and act as a spokesperson for the group.

**Delegate responsibilities for the day of the event.** Depending how big you expect your event to be, it's best to have a volunteer or volunteer team on these responsibilities:

- Lead chants and keep energy high
- Prepared to talk to press
- Take photos and video
- Greet and collect contact information from attendees
- Be the point person for dealing with any disruptive participants or questions from law enforcement
- Speakers ready to share their personal stories (if this is part of your event)

### During the Protest or Rally

**Be visible and be loud!** Well-organized protests will take advantage of key high-visibility areas to show off signs and let locals know what you are advocating for.

**Take photos and videos.** Designate several people in your group to take photos and videos that you can post on social media as well as distribute to the press later.

**Be safe and follow the law (such as any permitting requirements),** but also be aware of your First Amendment right to be there and do what you are doing. Police will typically be most concerned with keeping you out of the street and keeping sidewalks clear for pedestrians. Comply with lawful orders they give you, but insist on your right to protest.

**Find reporters** and tell them why you're there—getting local press coverage and making it clear that local community members support you.

### **After the Protest or Rally**

**Follow up with local reporters.** Email them photos and videos from the protest and any other important information, including the number of people who attended.

**Share your photos** on social media to show more people what you're doing.

**Follow up with activists** who attended with next steps. Thank them for coming, and remind them of what you're doing next to help achieve your goal.

**Plan** your next event or action.



## How to Talk About the Chaplain Policy

Members of the community of different backgrounds oppose the adoption of a Chaplain policy in Texas schools. We must talk about the issue in a manner that brings us together rather than alienating us. Strong messaging across our community ensures our efforts are amplified and heard by the board.

- **School counselors play an important role in students' lives that chaplains are not able to fulfill.**
  - School counselors are certified and licensed educators who improve student success for ALL students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. They help students apply academic achievement strategies, provide counseling, apply interpersonal skills, and plan for college or the workforce.
  - Chaplains, in contrast, are religious leaders who are trained to provide religious services and spiritual care.
  - We are facing a counselor shortage in Texas, and the school board should prioritize budget funds for hiring more school counselors, not unqualified chaplains.
    - [A Houston Chronicle study](#) done last year found that all but four of the 1,200 public school and open-enrollment charter districts in Texas failed to meet the Texas Education Agency's recommendation of one school counselor per 250 students.
  
- **Accepting the services of uncertified chaplains threatens the safety and education of our students.**
  - Chaplains, unlike counselors, are not given the professional training required to care for the mental health of all students. They are not required to have an advanced degree, be certified by the State Board for Educator Certification, be affiliated with a denomination, or be endorsed or licensed by any major or reputable entity.
  - Without the credentials, experience, and training required of school counselors, religious chaplains will not be equipped to support students dealing with serious matters like anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, or suicidal ideation.

- **Allowing chaplains in public schools would violate the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the Texas Constitution.**
  - Both the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the Texas Constitution protect our right to religious freedom. Hiring chaplains with taxpayer dollars would amount to government interference with religion and to the government preferring some religions over others. And it could lead to chaplains engaging in religious proselytization and coercing students to participate in religious activities or prayer. No student in a public school should feel pressured by government officials to participate in religious activities or indoctrinated into a particular religion.
  - Enjoying the freedom to decide whether to be religious is a core part of what makes us Texan and American.
  - Texans of all religious backgrounds, and those who are not religious, know that schools and government officials should not be dictating what our children believe or how they worship.
  
- **Freedom of religion means that parents — not public school employees — have the right to direct their children’s religious education and development.**
  - Families and students in Texas practice a wide variety of faiths, and many are nonreligious. All should feel welcome in public schools.
  - As a parent, I would be outraged if this school board voted to employ (or accept as volunteers) religious chaplains. By doing so, the board would be allowing a government intrusion into our private lives and sending a message that they think they know how to raise my children better than I do.
  - This law does not even require parental consent before a chaplain would provide “services” to my child—that is a violation of my right as a parent to raise my child as I see fit.
  - This law is part of a coordinated campaign by conservative Christian-based organizations and their legislative allies to force state-sponsored religion into public schools without parental consent.
  
- **Hiring chaplains would undermine our public schools.**
  - The same Texas politicians trying to control what students think — by banning books and censoring curricula — now want to dictate what students believe or how they worship. This school board has the

opportunity to stop this pattern and defend the integrity of public schools by voting “no” on chaplains.

- The school board should reject the use of chaplains and the risk of religious discrimination and bullying that comes with forcing state-sponsored religion into our public schools.
- Public schools should be places where our students are respected and are prepared to thrive in our diverse state, not places where they are coerced or indoctrinated with religious ideology.

- **Concern for LGBTQIA+ and other vulnerable students.**

- Employing unregulated and untrained chaplains in our schools would have an especially negative impact on vulnerable students, including those who face discrimination and rely on mental health support.
- Nothing in this law requires chaplains to have expertise to provide unbiased, adequate support for all of our students. This type of mental health support is essential to our most vulnerable students—like LGBTQIA+ students, BIPOC students, and students of non-majority religious backgrounds.
- “[A] chaplain is not trained in how the brain works or what helps it work best. Someone with a religious background could push prayer or other strategies that increase shame. And if those don’t work, the child is going to feel like their relationship with God is broken, and that they’re a broken and damaged person as a result.”- Dr. Lindsay Bira, a psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry at UT Health San Antonio.
- Further, unregulated chaplains may engage in directly harmful practices that endanger the mental health of students, such as discrimination and conversion therapy.
- As a parent, I am very worried that the district will hire chaplains that are incapable of providing unbiased, non-judgmental support to my LGBTQIA+ child.
- Given the history of religious institutions rejecting the LGBTQIA+ community, it is unlikely that LGBTQIA+ students will feel comfortable going to a chaplain for mental health support at school - or that an unlicensed chaplain would have the skills and know-how to help that student if they did. This further limits the mental health support available to LGBTQIA+ youth.