

Abigail Treadwell
North Berwick
LD 927

Written Testimony Against LD 927

Representative Paul, Senator Haggan, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Abby Treadwell of North Berwick. Today is my first time ever testifying at a public hearing for a bill, because as a citizen I simply cannot remain silent on so important an issue. I am strongly opposed to this bill, and frankly horrified that one would ever be proposed. This is a clear and egregious violation of both our state and federal constitution.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” I would hope that we all recognize that as the First Amendment to our Constitution. The US Supreme Court has consistently interpreted and enforced this as prohibiting the government, including public schools, from endorsing or promoting religious activities, such as the cases of *Engel v. Vitale*, *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, and many others. It’s what is known as the Establishment Clause. This bill, LD 927 goes directly against that by establishing and promoting religion in public schools.

Not only is this bill unconstitutional under the US Constitution, it also goes against Maine’s Constitution as well. Article 1, section 3: “Nor shall any person be compelled to attend any place of worship or to contribute to the support of any minister of the gospel or teacher of religion.” Because Maine public schools are funded by the taxes of its citizens, this bill contradicts our Constitution by having ordained chaplains on a school district’s payroll, and functioning as a figure in schools. Even if they were unpaid volunteers, this bill is still unconstitutional by Maine and the US Constitution.

Now, for those reasons alone, this bill should not exist, and we should not be having this conversation today. But we are here, suggesting our policymakers do not understand our Constitution, or are simply choosing to ignore it. Whatever the case may be, there are a myriad of other reasons why I am strongly opposed to this bill.

One of those is an alarming lack of oversight and accountability. According to the language of the bill, these religious figures are expected to provide “provide support, services and programs.” But they are not required to be trained or certified in any way that would facilitate that. School counselors, social workers, and teachers are required to obtain rigorous certifications and qualifications to work in school districts, as they should. I myself am an educator, and can verify the hours of training and professional development that go into looking after the social- emotional support of students. In order to provide mental health support, crisis intervention, and counseling, we need trained secular professionals.

And by giving these religious individuals exemption from civil liability, that would open the door to a flood of misconduct, and put our students at risk. There is a clear and undeniable history of religious figures and sexual abuse in religious organizations. This bill will now put all public school students at risk. How will families know if these religious figures are proselytizing, or inflicting their own religious beliefs and biases on vulnerable students? What is to prevent these religious figures from discriminating against certain students? According to the Supreme Court ruling in *Lee v. Weisman*, public schools must remain neutral on matters of religion. By the very nature of what a chaplain is and does, that is not possible.

I am saddened and deeply disappointed that such a bill would ever be proposed. To those who proposed this bill, you know that this is wrong, and I hope that you feel proper shame. I am strongly opposed to LD 927.

Abby Treadwell
North Berwick.