

Chaplains in CCA: Yea or Nay?

If any of you have been keeping track of recent Iowa legislation, you may be aware of a bill that proposes Iowa schools be allowed to hire chaplains to provide counseling services, support, and programs to students. Senate Study Bill 3092, as the bill is referred to, will make it so volunteer chaplains be put through the background investigation and termination procedure that regular school staff is also subjected to. However, according to the bill's language, volunteer chaplains are not required to be certified or recognized by the Board of Educational Examiners. The bill was proposed and supported by Republicans as a way to address and a potential solution to students' declining mental health in the state of Iowa.

Before we move on, let's define what a chaplain is. A chaplain is somebody who provides counseling in a secular institution such as the military, hospitals, prisons, and schools. They are representative of a certain religion, primarily Christianity, though technically speaking, they could provide services for anyone of any faith. They also work in private chapels.

Due to the nature of the prospect of a religious authority figure working at schools, naturally people would be very divided on the matter. Some believe that a chaplain being present in public school would be infringing upon the separation of church and state. Others believe that seeking solace and guidance in a religious authority figure would be beneficial to students of faith. Some worry that a chaplain may attempt to convert them to a religion or force their beliefs onto them, while others are open to the idea as long as they don't try to do that. Some people also believe that schools should spend their money on licensed mental health counselors or professionals rather than a chaplain.

These opinions and concerns were reflected in the feedback we received from fourteen CCA students in a survey about the Senate Study Bill. When they were asked if they wanted the bill to pass after being given a brief summary of what the bill was proposing and what a chaplain is, seven responded "no", five responded "maybe", and two responded "yes". Of those who responded "no", some felt that the bill would infringe upon the separation of church and state, some were uncomfortable with the concept of receiving counseling from a religious counselor, some believe chaplains should be approved by the Board of Educational Examiners, and others think that the school should spend its money on other, more important things. Someone who said "yes" thought that a chaplain would benefit students with their mental health. And those who said "maybe" had mixed opinions and could see either side.

When they were asked if they wanted CCA to hire a chaplain should the bill pass, eight responded "no", four said "maybe", and two said "yes". Their reasons were similar to their answers from the previous question.

However the next question, whether they think the student body would benefit from having a chaplain in CCA, was a lot more divided in terms of responses. Six responded "no", three said "maybe", and five said "yes". Those who said "no" reiterated the separation of church and state,

and argued that there wasn't anything a chaplain could provide that a counselor or a therapist couldn't. Not to mention non-religious students are unlikely to benefit from a chaplain's services. Those who said "maybe" were more mixed, saying that it would be beneficial to the religious students specifically and it depends on the individual chaplain and how competent and respectful they are. Those who said "yes" believe that it would be beneficial to students' mental health, religious or not.

When asked if they felt chaplains were necessary in CCA, eleven people responded "no" and three said "yes". Those who said "no" said that church should be separated from school, chaplains will only be beneficial under certain circumstances, they weren't comfortable with religion, and that CCA has been managing without a chaplain. Those who said "yes" believe that chaplains could help with issues with racism in the school, as well as assisting staff members. Whether that's true or not is unclear, but it's not technically outside the realm of possibility.

For the final question of whether chaplains would benefit students' mental health, the whole reason the bill was proposed in the first place, three said "no", eight said "maybe", and three said "yes". Those who said "no" argued that the school should pay for a licensed professional instead, and are concerned that the chaplain would try and convert them or wouldn't help the student period. Those who said "maybe" acknowledge the potential pros of having a chaplain, but say that it depends on the student receiving counseling and whether they are religious. And those who said "yes" said that consulting a chaplain would help students find faith, which could get them through hard times. Of course, due to the small sample size of people who responded, don't use these results to generalize the opinions of the student body as a whole. However these insights are useful to collect different perspectives on the topic.

Another important perspective to consider is that of our school counselor, Myleena Grenis. The following is an interview conducted via email:

Q: What exactly do you do as the school counselor for CCAHS?

A: I am actually a School Therapist hired by the district who works alongside the School Counselors. The School Counselors refer students whom are interested in working on their mental health more extensively. This varies, it can be working through past trauma, learning to manage symptoms of anxiety or depression or even working through text anxiety.

Q: How does your job as a counselor differ from that of a chaplain?

A: My job as a licensed therapist is similar in the fact that we both offer support for individuals who are struggling with emotional distress. My licensure and training involves extensive training in diagnostic criteria, human growth and development, various treatment modalities and VA assessment tools which can be utilized in treatment planning. My understanding of Chaplain services is that there is a greater sense of spiritual influence and guidance. A significant difference between myself and Chaplains would be my practice to separate my personal religious beliefs from those I serve and a Chaplain would generally be more self-disclosing with their personal religious beliefs. I also am unaware of licensing policies, Hipaa regulations and mandatory reporting necessary for Chaplains.

Q: Are there services, aside from religious counseling, that a chaplain provides that you couldn't?

A: Therapy can go in many directions with specific trainings in trauma, grief and loss, adjusting to life threatening illness, marital stress and so much more and the emphasis is specific to each provider and their service population. With that said, I feel comfortable serving the various adolescent needs here at CCA. I ethically would not provide religious counseling unless I had further training but do encourage spiritual discovery. I cannot think of any additional services a Chaplain could provide but I am not a "one size fits all therapist" simply meaning the Chaplain may be a better personal fit for someone.

Q: What is your opinion on the Senate Study Bill being proposed?

A: I would like more information. I do appreciate the variety of emotional wellness support for all students and would love an interest survey to be presented to students, parents and staff. The bill is slightly confusing to me in a public school setting. Personally, I grew up attending a private school K-12 and had a spiritual leader which was impactful for me at the time but also a very different setting than the Public School sector. I would also want to gain an understanding of ethical guidelines for the Chaplain service specifically about boundaries, privacy and mandatory trainings.

Q: If the bill were to be passed, do you think CCA should hire a chaplain? Why or why not?

A: I do appreciate the variety of emotional wellness support for all students and would love an interest survey to be presented to students, parents and staff. I have worked at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics and had great respect for the work they offered to mutual clients undergoing treatment for chronic illness, processing grief and end of life care.

Q: If a chaplain were to be hired in CCA, what effects do you think it would have on the overall wellbeing of the student body?

A: I am unsure. I would like to believe it will be a great service for individuals who are not interested in meeting with the School Counselor or School Therapist and also a great opportunity for individuals to take a deeper look at their spiritual discovery.

Q: If a chaplain were to be hired in CCA, would you worry about being unemployed from CCA? Why or why not?

A: No. I believe education systems will take the necessary shifts needed. If I were no longer employed at the district I would simply understand the students, families and staff would prefer an alternate direction. My role is already unique in the education system and I have said it countless times that my work would fully be done here if my employment was no longer necessary. The amazing part about mental health counseling and chaplain services is that there are outside agencies and telehealth options available today that were not available 5 years ago. If families want Psychotherapy or Chaplain services all of these needs can be met in the community with the support of Guardians.

Q: What role do you think a chaplain should play in a public school, if any?

A: I would like to understand this more. Right now I come back to the idea that the Chaplain would offer an alternate option to help meet the distress needs of students.

Now, for the million-dollar question: should CCA hire a chaplain? There's many reasons for or against this, which are valid in their own right, but there's a lot of gray area that needs to be addressed before making a decision like that. If the bill were to be passed, I hope that CCA

considers the needs of the students and the delicate balance between church and state before potentially hiring a chaplain.