

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 • MADISON, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • WWW.FFRF.ORG

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [rodriguez\\_s@hcsb.k12.fl.us](mailto:rodriguez_s@hcsb.k12.fl.us), [johnson\\_m2@hcsb.k12.fl.us](mailto:johnson_m2@hcsb.k12.fl.us),  
[bonczek\\_m@hcsb.k12.fl.us](mailto:bonczek_m@hcsb.k12.fl.us), [duval\\_s@hcsb.k12.fl.us](mailto:duval_s@hcsb.k12.fl.us), [hawkins\\_k@hcsb.k12.fl.us](mailto:hawkins_k@hcsb.k12.fl.us)**

Shannon Rodriguez  
Board Chair  
Hernando County School Board  
919 North Broad Street  
Brooksville, FL 34601

Re: Hernando County School Chaplain Program

Dear Chair Rodriguez and members of the Board:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to raise serious concerns over the Hernando County School District's recent decision to appoint Reverend John "Jack" Martin as an official District chaplain. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 42,000 members across the country, including more than 2,000 members and a local chapter in Florida, Central Florida Freethought Community. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that Hernando County has become the first school district in Florida to appoint a chaplain under the state's new law, effective July 1, 2024. We understand that Hernando County Schools chaplains are permitted to "provide religious or spiritual guidance to students" and "lead students in prayer."<sup>1</sup>

We understand that the district has appointed Reverend John "Jack" Martin to this role. Rev. Martin is affiliated with the so-called "Black Robe Regiment,"<sup>2</sup> a Christian Nationalist effort to get "patriot pastors" engaged in the public square and impacting political elections with their preaching.<sup>3</sup> The group's founder, William Cook, reportedly spoke at the "Jericho March" in Washington, D.C., which helped pave the way for the January 6th insurrection.<sup>4</sup>

Rev. Martin himself has publicly supported the January 6th rioters, writing: "Truth be told the crime in the capitol that day was the ratification of the theft of the presidency of the United States, but they want you to watch the shiny coin."<sup>5</sup> He even authored and performed a song titled "The Ballad of J6ers," which portrays the insurrection as a "peaceful, patriotic protest."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hernandoschools.org/departments/safe-schools/school-chaplain-program>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BlackRobeRegiment/posts/31944263691823795/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vice.com/en/article/who-are-the-black-robe-regiment/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://publicwitness.wordandway.org/p/pastor-pushing-maga-conspiracy-theories>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://x.com/ReflectionsVid1/status/1479108722005659654>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://rumble.com/v6zgkra-the-ballad-of-j6ers-lyrics-by-jack-martin.html>.

Rev. Martin has argued that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that non-Christians should be barred from offering prayers to open congressional sessions.<sup>7</sup> He has also been an outspoken opponent of public education, telling parents: “To any parent today I would say, look into private schools. If you are of a particular faith look into a faith-based school. And if you are not able to do that consider home school.”<sup>8</sup>

We request that you immediately end your chaplain program and cease providing Rev. Martin access to Hernando County Schools’ students.

Your decision to establish a chaplaincy program and appoint Rev. Jack Martin raises profound constitutional and practical concerns. Public schools are charged with educating students in an inclusive environment, not with providing religious or spiritual guidance or prayer leaders. Rev. Martin has openly promoted Christian nationalism and disparaged public education itself. His stated views are incompatible with the religious neutrality required of public schools and threaten to undermine the trust and inclusivity essential to serving Hernando County’s diverse student body.

Furthermore, there are several good reasons why no other district in Florida has chosen to install chaplains in its schools. Students in need of emotional or psychological support should be served by trained professionals such as school counselors, psychologists, and social workers — not clergy advancing religious or political agendas.

The organization behind chaplain bills all over the country, the National School Chaplain Association (NSCA), has bragged about their chaplains using their new school positions to win converts and to push their religious views into the lives of students and staff. In fact, NSCA’s parent organization, Mission Generation Inc., openly declares its mission to target “the largest unreached people group inside of the schools around the world” with the aim of “influenc[ing] those in education until the saving grace of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with Him.”<sup>9</sup> In its own words, Mission Generation admits it seeks to take advantage of the “massive lack of school counselors throughout public schools”<sup>10</sup> by inserting religious chaplains into that gap in order to give “students, teachers, and parents the tools they need to make quality life decisions based on a personal relationship with Jesus and the leading of the holy spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

At a recent NSCA event a speaker bragged about school staff, such as school nurses and custodians, who were working with NSCA to proselytize students discreetly. They also reportedly encourage chaplains to train “student chaplains,” who can proselytize their peers without constitutional concerns. NSCA’s goal is not to provide a neutral service to all students, but rather to convert students to NSCA’s preferred religion.

The founder of these groups, a self-described former international drug-smuggling pirate, is Rocky Malloy.<sup>12</sup> Malloy is a media hog and incessant fundraiser who seeks to flood American public schools with Christian chaplains, all while hawking a book on the topic.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://pastorjackmartin.substack.com/p/if-were-1-nation-under-god-then-why>.

<sup>8</sup> [https://pastorjackmartin.substack.com/p/public-school-retake-it-or-reject?utm\\_source=publication-search](https://pastorjackmartin.substack.com/p/public-school-retake-it-or-reject?utm_source=publication-search).

<sup>9</sup> [web.archive.org/web/20211025042005/https://missiongeneration.org/](https://web.archive.org/web/20211025042005/https://missiongeneration.org/).

<sup>10</sup> [app.candid.org/profile/8191583/national-school-chaplain-association-76-0324439?activeTab=3](https://app.candid.org/profile/8191583/national-school-chaplain-association-76-0324439?activeTab=3).

<sup>11</sup> [projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/760324439/202341009349300609/full](https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/760324439/202341009349300609/full).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/05/19/legislature-chaplain-bill-rocky-malloy/>.

Put simply, NSCA and Malloy are pushing for public school chaplains to win converts and personal profit. This is not an appropriate mission for a public school system to support.

Public schools must educate, not evangelize. It is unconstitutional for a public school district to employ someone to pray with and provide “religious guidance” to students. Chaplains in public schools present significant constitutional issues under the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause and Article I, Sec. 3 of the Florida Constitution. The Supreme Court has long held that public schools must remain neutral regarding religion, neither endorsing nor impeding one’s practice of a particular religion. *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *McCullum v. Bd. of Ed.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948).

Stamping the school’s seal of approval on the religious leadership of chaplains in positions of authority over students crosses the line into unconstitutional promotion of religion by the school district. It does not matter if some parents want their children provided with religious guidance at public school; it is beyond the scope of a public school to provide such guidance in the first place.

You must uphold the freedom of conscience for all students, regardless of their religious beliefs, or lack thereof. Students have a right to a secular public school system, and protecting this right ensures that all students are equally valued by the district, regardless of whether students are members of the majority religion, or whether they are religious at all. Maintaining this neutrality guarantees that public education remains an environment where young people can learn and develop without religious coercion, thereby protecting both student rights and the district’s constitutional duties.

By permitting Rev. Martin and other chaplains to provide religious guidance and prayer for students, you have ongoing control over their speech, creating an additional layer of trouble for the District. You may end up having to take action against Rev. Martin for proselytizing students, or if his religious message interferes with the learning environment; this opens the school district up to litigation both from the students affected and from the religious leaders employed by the district. That control over religious figures and their speech is truly a no-win scenario for the District.

Further, now that you’ve allowed one chaplain, you will always have to worry about turning down future candidates, who may think they were refused a chaplaincy because their religious affiliation or religious beliefs were disfavored by the District. Facing multiple candidates with troubling and controversial religious perspectives, you may be effectively forced to favor certain religious beliefs over others, a fraught situation best avoided altogether.

In addition to constitutional concerns, there are also significant practical concerns. School counselors are uniquely qualified to perform the duties they undertake, including providing mental health services and assisting with college and career planning. Chaplains don’t possess the academic and professional credentials of a school counselor or other support staff. The primary role of chaplains is to provide pastoral or religious counseling within their own religious sect, not to offer secular counseling to anyone who may need it. Even though you have adopted rules prohibiting proselytizing, chaplains don’t have the necessary experience or training to ensure that they adhere to a school’s educational mandates and avoid veering into impermissible religious counseling and other forms of promoting religion.

Students from many different backgrounds bring with them diverse experiences and complicated issues to school each day, including those students who are a part of the 55 percent of Generation Z who are

non-Christian.<sup>13</sup> When students seek counseling to assist with these issues, they must be addressed by trained professionals, such as certified school counselors. Without the same credentials and training as school counselors, chaplains are not adequately equipped to support students dealing with potentially life-threatening matters. Relying on uncertified individuals to perform these duties risks causing serious harm to students.

We respectfully urge you to immediately end your chaplain policy and to reaffirm the District's commitment to protecting students' rights to a secular public school system. It is unconstitutional for a public school to provide a religious leader special access to its students for the purpose of offering them religious guidance and praying with them. FFRF will continue to monitor this situation closely. Please understand that permitting a religious chaplaincy in a public school district jeopardizes the rights of students and parents and invites legal challenge.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Line", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Christopher Line  
Legal Counsel  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/48Drzce>.