Chaplaincy Bill – Rep. Ritter's Sponsor Testimony
HB531

Chair Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the House Education Committee — thank you for the opportunity to present sponsor testimony on **HB531**, known as the "**School Chaplain Act**."

This bill was drafted with a simple purpose: to give our schools another tool to support the whole child — intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually — while preserving local control and respecting every student's freedom of choice and belief.

HB531 allows public schools, including school districts, community schools, and STEM schools, to employ or engage school chaplains.

- These chaplains would provide voluntary guidance, mentorship, and emotional or spiritual support to students who choose to seek it.
    - It's an option, not a mandate.
    - Schools may decide whether to offer such services, and students are **never required** to participate.

Every educator knows that students today face challenges that go far beyond academics.

- Some students come to school carrying anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and a deep hunger for meaning and belonging.
- Our counselors and teachers already do heroic work, but many will tell you that the social and emotional needs of students continue to grow faster than the resources we can provide.

- House Bill 531 is about offering schools one more way to meet those needs — through trusted adults who are trained to listen, to encourage, and to help students build character and resilience.

Chaplains have long served in settings where people confront difficult questions — in the military, hospitals, prisons, and universities.

- They are trained to meet people where they are, regardless of belief or background, and to offer confidential, compassionate support.
- What this bill does is simply make clear that schools in Ohio may also make use of that time-tested model, should their local community wish to do so.

The bill leaves all decisions about implementation in local hands.

- Each school board or governing authority will decide whether to adopt a chaplaincy program, how to structure it, and who to select.
- Chaplains will undergo the same background checks and employment standards as any other school staff.
- Participation by students must always be voluntary, and no student can ever be pressured or compelled to meet with a chaplain.

This legislation is not about replacing school counselors or mental health professionals.

- Rather, it's about complementing the good work they already do.
- Chaplains can fill a different niche — one focused on moral encouragement, mentorship, and the kind of personal guidance that often helps students find direction when they're struggling.
- And because the bill imposes no statewide mandate or cost, schools have full discretion to decide whether it's right for them.

HB531 upholds the principle of religious freedom.

- It neither establishes nor promotes any faith tradition.
- It simply gives schools the flexibility to partner with qualified individuals who can support students' personal growth in a manner consistent with local values and constitutional safeguards.

Ultimately, this is about giving schools options. It's about empowering communities to decide what best serves their young people.

- By authorizing school chaplains in a voluntary, transparent, and locally controlled way, we strengthen the capacity of Ohio's schools to care for the whole child — not just their intellect, but their heart and spirit as well.

Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for your thoughtful consideration of HB531.

I'm grateful for your time and welcome any questions you may have.