

The Delray Democrat

Despite High Student Suicide Rates, DeSantis Sends in the Clowns¹

June Sandra Neal

To Governor DeSantis and the Republican legislators: What the hell were you thinking? Allowing chaplains with no requirements for mental health education to counsel students? And once again, chipping away at our cherished church-state separation?

Yep, two more proposals to transform Florida into a Straight, White, Christian Nationalist theocracy are both homophobic—and dangerous—laws. The first, [HB 931](#), puts every Florida student in need of help at risk by allowing “chaplains”—no licensing, experience or training required—to counsel them.

In your April 18 2024 [press release](#), you called the chaplains “*additional* resources for students.” [emphasis added] *Additional to what?* Your shameful “Don’t Say Gay” law, your whitewashing of African American history and your denigration of immigrants were gag orders on school personnel to ensure they and the students couldn’t discuss race, gender identity and the struggles of immigrants. Then you fill the counseling hole you created with “chaplains,” honorifics which can connote anything from a master ‘s in divinity to a tin badge from a cereal box.

No one’s arguing that religion doesn’t play a role in the well-being of many people, or that some faith-based leaders may have training in counseling. The problem is just that; they are faith-based. And they are no substitute for licensed school psychologists and psychiatrists.

You’re clearly ignorant of the complexity of the issues our kids face: depression and other mental illnesses, child victimization, food and housing instability, homelessness, drug & alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, gun violence, bullying, domestic abuse and inadequate foster care. Some have had to assume parental duties for younger siblings. Others made tragic headlines with mass shootings. The struggle with sexual identity can be so overwhelming, some attempt, and succeed at, suicide. Schizophrenia can present as early as late teens—are your chaplains trained to pick up on the signs?

So, here’s the rub. Many religious sects condemn suicide. That’s like condemning having cancer. “[Suicide](#) ... remains one of the top three causes of death for those between ages 10-34.” For those surviving self-harm attempts, condemnation is a deadly prescription. Even when it’s not overt.

Your pandered to the Straight, White, Christian Nationalists with [HB1069](#), with a law as far from mental health science as Big Foot: “[A] person's sex is an immutable biological trait and cannot be changed.” But there are hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ+ here.

Dead Kids Therapy. Known as Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE), these treatments were condemned in 2021 by the [American Psychological Association](#). Note they included conversion

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), May 2024, page 4.

and reparation therapy and “using religious practices such as prayer, scripture study, exorcism, and confessing same-gender attractions. The APA affirms that scientific evidence and clinical experience indicate that SOCE put individuals at significant risk of harm.” The American Psychiatric Association issued a similar [statement](#).

“Risk of harm” can mean death. The [American Journal of Public Health](#) wrote that “LGBTQ youth who underwent conversion therapy were more than twice as likely to report having attempted suicide and more than 2.5 times as likely to report multiple suicide attempts in the past year.” [2021]

These quack treatments are torture. For the first time in its history, The U.N. Committee Against Torture (CAT) announced “Conversion therapy, when forced or otherwise involuntary, *can breach the prohibition on torture and ill-treatment*, [author’s emphasis] and youth lack adequate legal protection and are particularly vulnerable to involuntary or coercive [treatment](#).”

Your laws are forms of child abuse. In June 2023, the “Human Rights Campaign declared a [national state of emergency for LGBTQ+ Americans](#), the first in the LGBTQ civil rights organization’s over 40-year history. This was prompted by the [more than 560 anti-transgender bills](#) that have been introduced in the U.S. through July 2023, 80 of which have passed.” **You certainly contributed your share.**