

October 21, 2025
Ohio House Education Committee Meeting
Written Testimony
Swartout

Testimony in Support of House Bill 486, The Charlie Kirk American Heritage Act

Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support (but with conditions) of House Bill 486, The Charlie Kirk American Heritage Act.

My name is Max Swartout, and I am an elementary music teacher at Walls Elementary School in Kent City Schools. I am a dedicated educator and advocate for comprehensive and factual history instruction. I hold a Master's degree in the Cultural Foundations of Education from Kent State University, where my Master's thesis was entitled, "Education for Sustainability in Every Classroom of the School." My work in education has always been rooted in a commitment to honesty, equity, justice, peace, empathy, and unity. I believe that finding common ground and highlighting the relatable components of diverse positions is essential, particularly when teaching history.

I would support H.B. 486 because it offers a clarifying step toward ensuring that our students receive a complete and accurate account of American history, including the profound influence of religion, particularly Christianity, on the nation's foundation and development.

Clarifying and Affirming Existing Academic Freedom

House Bill 486 is not about creating new mandates or laws; rather, as Representative Click stated in his testimony, it is a bill that "clarifies the law" and "simply removes the invisible shackles that often hinder a full and transparent teaching of American History." This clarification is crucial because, despite the academic freedom that already exists, many educators operate under "an illusion of prohibition from teaching certain historical facts" due to fear of reprimands or lawsuits. H.B. 486 directly addresses this fear by affirming for instructors "the law as it already exists".

The bill is explicitly not inviting instructors to teach "doctrine or to proselytize". Instead, it simply ensures that "no history should be off limits or even perceived to be off limits by our educators". It underscores that it is "possible to teach the accurate history of the impact of Christianity on our nation without proselytizing and suggesting to students that they should be Christians", which is a core tenet of responsible and balanced historical instruction.

Restoring Honesty and Depth to American History

A commitment to factual, honest history requires acknowledging the foundational role that faith has played in shaping American ideals and institutions. Representative Dovilla

eloquently stated that this legislation is "not about rewriting history. It is about restoring honesty and depth to the way we teach it".

The arguments presented by the bill's sponsors highlight several historical facts that deserve their place in the classroom:

- **Influence on Foundational Principles:** Representative Click notes that the "overwhelming influence of Christianity on the foundation of this nation" is what makes the United States "stand[] alone in the history of nations". Click also points to sources that confirm that citations from the Scriptures made up 34% of all discourse during the founding era. Furthermore, Click shares the "general Principles" on which the Founders achieved Independence were, as John Adams wrote, "the general Principles of Christianity, in which all those Sects were United".
- **The Struggle for Liberty and Justice:** Representative Dovilla points to the fact that the "record of faith's influence in America is unmistakable". He indicates that this influence can be seen from the Pilgrims' covenant of self-governance to the moral courage of abolitionists and civil rights leaders like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who were motivated by their faith, carried the torch of justice and human dignity forward.
- **The Origin of Separation of Church and State:** Representative Click shows that a complete historical examination of the "separation of church and state" reveals that the concept originated with the pastor and politician Roger Williams, and was derived from Christian teaching, intended to protect religious expression rather than silence it. This Christian value of religious liberty is what protects "every sect and creed," ensuring that people of all beliefs "enjoy their liberties to believe or not believe according to their conscience".

By allowing teachers to "tell the whole story of America", H.B. 486 will equip our students with a more accurate understanding of why our freedoms endure, which Representative Dovilla connects to the "moral convictions that gave them birth." This "historical accuracy" is not about promoting one faith, but about ensuring that a complete and well-documented truth is available to all students.

Affirming Local Control and Accountability

At its core, this legislation is an affirmation of the principle of local democratic control and accountability in education. Curriculum is fundamentally a local issue (however, I do believe this principle has been and continues to be eroding). In Ohio, the power structure and chain of accountability are clear: teachers answer to their principals,

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Swartout

principals to the superintendent, the superintendent to the locally elected Board of Education, and the Board of Education to the voters—the parents and citizens of the community.

This bill is not an injection of ideology from the legislature; rather, it is an affirmation of this existing power structure and local democracy. School boards should approve curriculum, and teachers should be trusted to teach it with integrity. We must not allow teachers to lose the art of teaching, which includes their professional judgment in exploring and including supplemental information relevant to the topic or to preparing students for life. If there are issues regarding instruction or content, that existing local structure—the school's power structure and the Board of Education—is empowered to address them.

I trust our school teachers and leaders; and I trust parents and voters to be engaged in the process of educating our youth. Parents can and should be engaged by talking with their children's teacher, asking students about their school days, and reading the materials sent home. Teachers don't want to be divisive. We want our students to be well-educated for the good of all of us, enabling them to create strong futures for themselves and their children.

A Call for Consistency and Comprehensive History

I urge committee members and legislators at large to approach this legislation with an open mind, recognizing the value of affirming academic freedom. The concept of teaching history in its fullness is one we can and should agree on.

However, my support for House Bill 486 is conditional: I'd support this bill only if an amendment is added that extends the list of specific historical topics that educators are affirmed to teach to include:

- Black American history
- Native American History
- Asian American history
- Italian American history
- Mexican American history
- Latinx American history
- Women's history
- Jewish American History
- Disability History
- LGBTQIA+ history

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If we genuinely believe, as Representative Click argues, that we "cannot afford to hide from our history" and that "no history should be off limits", then our affirmation of academic freedom must be consistent and inclusive of all historical facts and communities that have shaped our nation.

This brings me to a crucial point of necessary recertification. It is difficult to fully reconcile the stated purpose of this bill—to affirm the right of teachers to present a full, uncensored historical record—with the simultaneous advocacy for legislation like House Bill 8 of the 135th General Assembly (the "Don't Say Gay" bill). HB 8, which aimed to restrict instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity, directly prohibits the very right that the creators of HB 486 seek to uphold.

To champion the freedom to teach historical facts regarding one topic while actively legislating to prohibit the discussion of historical facts and the very existence of another community (LGBTQIA+) within the classroom strikes me as an unfortunate example of hypocrisy. If we are truly committed to removing "invisible shackles" on our educators, we must remove all of them.

I, personally, feel unable to be truly open about my own family with my students. I feel unable to allow students to discuss their same-sex parents in class. Are either of these instances examples of "sexuality content" which this legislature failed to define in a way that educators can be certain of what qualifies?

Therefore, I ask that this committee adopt an amendment to HB 486 to make the affirmation of academic freedom truly comprehensive and that all members consider how we can demonstrate consistent, principled support for historical accuracy, rather than selective application. Such amendments to H.B. 486 must undoubtedly come with changes to parts of the ORC made law through H.B. 8 of the 135th General Assembly.

I respectfully urge your favorable consideration of House Bill 486, *but only with the necessary amendments*. By supporting this bill in its complete and honest form, we are standing for academic freedom and historical truth for every Ohio student, while also affirming the principle of local control and trust in our educational community.

Thank you for your time and kind attention. I welcome any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

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