

HB 486 Adam Motter

Chair Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and Members of the Education Committee:

I come to you today as an Ohio citizen in opposition to this bill.

My expertise in social studies education includes being a high school social studies teacher for over 13 years and a social studies curriculum specialist for Akron Public Schools. Additionally, I am a past president of the Ohio Council for the Social Studies (OCSS) and currently serve as the Executive Director of OCSS.

Providing opposition to this bill is personally very difficult for me. Here is why:

- I have a specific bias: I am a Christian.
- As an educator, I have taught students and guided teachers on the significance of religion across historical eras and figures.
- I have taught my own children to value the virtues reflected in the list.

The bill itself contains multiple assertions, and as a result, unpacking all of them is complex. This testimony examines four critical considerations as this committee looks toward the future of this bill.

Please note there are other considerations that you will likely have to address. Examples include the following: legal entanglements and litigation both locally and at the state level regarding religion and schools, as well as potential historical inaccuracies on the list).

My testimony is focused more directly on K–12 social studies education.

Consideration #1: The first purpose of the bill

You read in sponsor testimony:

“It simply removes the invisible shackles that often hinder a full and transparent teaching of American History.”

You also heard from a sponsor:

- There are “invisible shackles.”
- A “list of things not often taught.”

- “I don’t think they teach why the Pilgrims came over.”

Based on the testimony, it appears the word “invisible” means not in plain sight or perhaps not as clear as it could or should be. In fact, there was mention of some teachers and even a superintendent not really knowing what they were allowed to teach. Further, this was framed in the context of not really knowing if teaching the significance of Christianity on early American history was allowed.

However, the distinction and evidence are very visible in black and white. There are many examples, at many different grade levels, of specific learning goals that speak to the historical significance of religion in early American history, modern U.S. history, and world history (specifically the impact of Christianity). The chart below includes just a few examples.

HB 486 Core Provision	Redundancy in Ohio Learning Standards (Required)
Instruction on "historical, positive impact of religion" and the "influence of Christianity on freedom and liberties" is promoted (Sec. 3320.10).	Grade 8: Colonization to Independence (Content Statement 2) explicitly requires teaching the religious motivation for colonization: "North America... was explored and colonized by Europeans for economic and religious reasons."
Promoting to teaching of the Northwest Ordinance's reference to "Religion, morality, and knowledge" (from list item T).	Grade 4: Ohio in the United States (Content Statement 5) requires the study of the Northwest Ordinance because it "incorporated democratic ideals into the territories." Covering this required document includes its key clauses on religion and morality.
Promoting the religious influence in the civil rights movement (e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.) (from list item Q).	High School: American History (Content Statement 18) mandates study of the Civil Rights Movement. The religious roots (Dr. King, church-based efforts) are a necessary component of teaching this required historical standard.
Focus on American freedom and liberties.	High School: American Government (Content Statement 8) requires students to study the Bill of Rights, which includes the First Amendment's Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses (freedom of religion), thereby requiring instruction on the history of religious liberty.

The state standards and the State Model Curriculum offer multiple grade-level examples in history that include discussion of the significance of religion, and in this case, Christianity.

Every public school in Ohio uses these standards, and students are held accountable for this learning in the U.S. History and Government End-of-Course Exams. These standards are typically board-adopted as the graded course of study for each course. Teachers enter into a teaching contract to teach the prescribed curriculum of the district. I honestly do not know any middle or high school social studies teachers who would say that they have not examined the standards document or the model curriculum.

Even if a teacher indicated that they are familiar with the standards but are not as sure about some of the topics on your list, many of the examples on the list, and more importantly, many

examples of the significance of religion (specifically, Christianity) in US History are **very visible** in social studies textbooks.

In my entire career—as a teacher, an instructional leader, and a curriculum specialist in state and national settings—I have never once, in over 30 years, heard a teacher say, “If something is present in my textbook, am I allowed to teach it?”

These questions are fair (by teachers, parents, lawmakers, etc.). When we get these questions, the focus should always be “what do the standards actually say and what does your board adopted textbook actually say? The claim that there are “invisible shackles”, is not an accurate claim.

Consideration #2: The second purpose of the bill

You read in sponsor testimony:

“I believe that if students were free to learn about the historic influence of Christianity on their freedoms, there would be less hate and less violence.”

The bill itself states:

“An accurate and historical account of the influence of Christianity on the freedom and liberties ingrained in our culture is imperative to reducing ignorance of American history, hate, and violence within our society.”

This claim is not supported by credible empirical evidence. No rigorous, peer-reviewed studies demonstrate a causal link between teaching Christianity in K-12 public schools and improved civic outcomes.

However, civic education in public schools has been studied for decades and has strong empirical evidence of producing positive civic and democratic outcomes (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] Civics; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Campbell, 2008; Galston, 2001; Campbell, 2019). Consider the following:

- **Torney-Purta et al. (2001, *Civic Education Across Countries*):** Early exposure to civic discussion in school is one of the strongest predictors of adult democratic engagement.
- **Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg (2017, *The Republic Is [Still] at Risk*):** Comprehensive civics programs strengthen trust, empathy, and engagement across political lines.

If we wish to reduce ignorance, hate, and violence, we know that civics education would be far better served to support these goals. . We also know that in the “standards era,” social studies

and civics education have been marginalized in an overcrowded curriculum. More and more states are now mandating U.S. History and Civics (through high school assessments, graduation requirements, etc.) than ever before.

Furthermore, there is a long history of virtue-based education in our country. It has evolved greatly over the years. However, at its core, the goal has always been to prepare students to develop virtues that include respect, responsibility, fairness, honesty, citizenship, and trustworthiness. Many of these goals are drawn from Aristotelian and Judeo-Christian traditions.

There is actually far better evidence supporting the claim that civics education reduces “ignorance of American history, hate, and violence within our society.” The current language of this bill cannot accurately make that claim.

Consideration #3: The language of the bill infers selective use of evidence

The bill states:

“An **accurate and historical account** of the influence of Christianity on the freedom and liberties ingrained in our culture is imperative to reducing ignorance of American history, hate, and violence within our society.”

“**Accurate historical instruction** regarding verifiable, historical impacts of religion on American history is factual and is not proselytization or a violation of the First Amendment.”

The definition of history is the study and interpretation of the past based on evidence (documents, artifacts, records). This includes **all** of it—positive and otherwise. This is not in dispute; even the sponsors recognized it in their testimony. Yet, the language of the bill references only “positive” impacts.

Why wouldn’t the bill explicitly state that teaching the historical impacts of religion **accurately** means teaching impacts that had both positive and negative consequences (and then cite the actual standards that we use)?

We want students to think like historians. We want them to see that much of history requires analyzing different sources and forming conclusions based on the evidence. Currently, the bill describes a reality in which teaching the impact of Christianity should be done with accuracy—but only positive facts and heritage are endorsed by the General Assembly.

Consideration #4: The naming of the bill

One of the goals of the bill is “reducing ignorance of American history, hate, and violence within our society.” Consider renaming the bill. Charlie Kirk is [sourced as making comments](#) that likely do not reflect the Ohio Legislature or many Ohioans.

Consider instead:

- American Christian Heritage Act or other language that better reflects the goal of the bill
- Making this into a resolution since it fits the purpose of a resolution far better than the bill.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

Respectfully,

Adam Motter