

Good afternoon, Chair Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the committee.

I'm Finn Laursen and I'm here today to testify as a proponent for House Bill 486 as one who is a product of Ohio public schools and who has dedicated the last 55 years serving the public schools. I am not an outsider making judgments on others, but one who has served as a teacher, counselor, principal and superintendent for 32 years within our public schools. I have invested another 23 years supporting educators in public schools across the nation through Christian Educators Association, a professional association specifically serving those laboring in our public schools.

I am a public school advocate, but I have seen a slow deterioration within our public school culture. Part of the departure from the quality schools we once offered our students is the false conviction that public schools need to create a God-free zone so in the process have even left out the Biblical and Christian influence on our history and culture. This has led to a chilling effect on educators, creating uncertainty in what they may and may not teach.

Having watched the impact of Charlie Kirk, even after his death, I see hope as youth across the nation are showing love for our country and turning toward faith. Now is the perfect time to enact the Charlie Kirk American Heritage Act to affirm the freedom teachers have to provide instruction on the historical Christian influence on this nation. Many do not know they have this freedom and many need the affirmation to do so because of a growing opposition to this truth.

Let's take a look at a timeline of our history, which confirms the profound influence of the Bible in America from Colonial times through our founding and forward. In 1776 the Bible was the bestselling book in the colonies. An exhaustive study of documents from America's founding era (1760-1805) reveals that the Founders quoted the Bible more frequently than any other source and worked many of the principles they found there into the founding documents.

The textbook used to teach students to read in the colonies was the New England Primer. This book was so fundamental that 5 million copies were in circulation even though there were only 4 million people in the colonies.. This public school text book taught the alphabet through creative little sayings like " 'A – Adam's fall, We sinned all." and " 'C – Christ crucified, For sinners died." The alphabet was like a walk through the Bible.

In 1787 at the Constitutional Convention Benjamin Franklin, perhaps one of our least Godly of our forefathers, set the tone for the writing. He realized that they had been meeting without success to draft a guiding document for a new nation. On June 28,th Benjamin Franklin addressed the stalled Convention, "...I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the House, they

labor in vain that build it.’ I firmly believe this, and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel.” After this speech overflowing with Biblical allusions, all future sessions were commenced with prayer.

As they penned the Constitution, they assured that future government agencies, like schools, would not control religion or silence the convictions of a religious people. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution makes it clear: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....”

This Establishment Clause declares that no government agency can act in any way to establish a religion or do anything to stop the expression of religion. Thus, the government can neither force religious beliefs on others nor roadblock religious activity of American citizens.

In 1789 the first Federal Education Law post-Constitution was passed. Our forefathers made it clear that public education in this new nation must be made up of three components: Religion, Morality, and Knowledge. They believed that religion was the basis for morality and if religion were removed, morality would soon collapse. They clarified that knowledge was important, but without religion and morality, knowledge could actually be dangerous.

This perspective was not just held by a few, but was generally accepted. Noah Webster, known as the *Schoolmaster to America*, said, “Any system of education...which limits instruction to the arts and sciences and rejects the aids of religion in forming the characters of citizens, is essentially defective.” Our first president George Washington said, “Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that our national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

In 1802 the Danbury Baptist Association expressed a concern about their religious liberties to then-President Thomas Jefferson. A creative politician, Jefferson responded using a version of a phrase used by Baptist preacher Roger Williams. Williams had preached about the wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world. Using language Jefferson felt they would understand, he told them that the legislature should “ ‘make no laws respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.”

Far too often the term “separation between Church and State” is misused to imply that the church should not interfere with the state rather than the state not interfering with the church, as Jefferson had intended. This is often the rallying cry to keep faith issues out of our schools rather than teaching about the effects of religion as our Constitution allows.

Even the courts of the time supported laws influenced by Christianity, such as Blue Laws requiring stores to be closed on the Christian Sabbath, Sunday. In 1892, a non-Christian fought against such a law as he was of a different faith. The US Supreme Court decided against the man and included the following in the decision: “Our laws and institutions must necessarily be based

upon the teachings of the Redeemer of Mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise; and in this sense and to this extent, our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian.”

With the strong influence Christianity had on our founding, it is no wonder that American literature, art, and music reflect the same. Newsweek Magazine featured an article entitled How the Bible Made America in its closing issue of 1982, confirmed this understanding, stating unequivocally “...for centuries, [the Bible] has exerted an unrivaled influence on American culture, politics and social life.”

My years and experience in public education convince me that American history and civic responsibility call for clarity. Our teachers and their administrations should be reminded of the freedom to teach about the influence Christianity has had on our nation’s history and culture, as the Charlie Kirk American Heritage Act provides.