

Testimony on HB 166: Main Operating Budget for FY 2020-2021
Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
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Celeste Kamasa
Breakthrough Schools, Alumnus

Chairman Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Subcommittee; my name is Celeste Kamasa, an alumnus of Breakthrough Schools, class of 2011.

Everyone hears stories of the school system failing students because they let high performing students slip through the cracks and don't provide the education necessary for them to showcase their talent. I was one of those students. For grades K-5, I went to the local neighborhood school where all of my other family went because it was the only option. Starting as early as kindergarten, they weren't able to keep me occupied with work and I spent countless afternoons sitting in "timeout" asleep in the other kindergarten room simply because they wanted me out of my classroom so I didn't distract other students.

I was even suspended for 2 weeks at a time simply because they didn't know what to do with me, and I was sent to other classrooms so I didn't distract others. Me, sitting in class asleep for hours at a time because I'd be days and sometimes weeks ahead of the other students in the scheduled work. I had straight A's all the time but bad behavior because they couldn't keep up with me. Multiple teachers in different grades over the years told me and my mother directly that I wouldn't make straight A's in their class, and that they'd be the teacher that broke my record of being the highest performing student in the school. Those same teachers also couldn't keep me occupied even with purposely planning extra work just for me. So, at the end of fifth grade, the principal basically told my mother we needed to find another school because they didn't know what to do with me.

During the search for new schools, two men walked up to our porch, one being John Zitzner, President of Breakthrough and the other was the co-founder of Eprep, my Breakthrough School. They went over how rigorous the school was, the discipline and the structure of the school. How I wouldn't be bored and how I'd stay engaged and be provided with an education above what other schools could. That all sounded great to my mother so she enrolled me. I don't know if any of you know the structure of Eprep, but it's very tight and well organized and I hated it. I went from doing basically whatever I wanted, to being told what to do every second of everyday. I started out hating it but somewhere along the line I started loving it. Here's why I hated it: because I had so much work to do, most of the time I went home with homework and I wasn't used to that. I'd have to get up earlier and go to bed later, because of homework on top of being an athlete. But the reasons I hated the school at first, are the same reasons I came to love it. They're the same reasons I advocate so strongly for Breakthrough.

I didn't fully introduce myself when I began, allow me to reintroduce myself fully. I'm Celeste Kamasa, Breakthrough alumnus, Mechanical Engineer. Why Breakthrough? Because Breakthrough Schools was the first place anyone outside of my family who told me that I'm going to go to college. It's the first school where I met teachers that actually cared about the students, their education and their future. It's where I was exposed to so many possible fields and possible career paths in life that I had never thought of before. At a Breakthrough School, a charter school, is where my dream of becoming a mechanical engineer was created. Teachers

worked hard to make sure we not only got educated but also that we were exposed to things outside of the classroom to help spark some motivation as to what we wanted to do in college. Breakthrough is a network of K-8 schools. So children as young as 5 years old are hearing that they are going to go to college. At the age of 12 years old, I heard for the first time by a school that I was going to go to a high performing high school, that I was going to go to college, I was going to be something in life- and they set the foundation to make sure that happened. From Breakthrough I continued on to the number 1 high school in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, where I graduated in 3 years, in the top 10 of the class, 2 classes short of an Associate's degree. From there I went on to graduate from Ohio Northern University with a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering. Ohio Northern, in turn, was made possible by another donor of Breakthrough Schools. He believed so much in the work Breakthrough is doing for students, that he created a scholarship for Breakthrough grads at ONU, further supporting Breakthrough's promise that we will go to college.

I'm no educator but I strongly believe in students getting quality education and the support needed to be great. So again, why Breakthrough? Why charter schools? Because charter schools like the Breakthrough network are providing mostly impoverished, low income, inner city students with the chance at an education that rivals the private and suburban schools that they don't have the means or access to attend. They're changing lives of kids that for the most part, have never been told they'll be anything or have the support and push they need to believe they can do whatever. They're sparking dreams and instilling the drive, motivation and foundation of success in students so they can go on to be a lawyer, engineer, a doctor, a paleontologist. Because from firsthand experience, I know that they're changing the lives and futures of thousands of students and helping dreams become reality.

My story is not unlike those of thousands of kids across Ohio who have experienced the life changing education received at one of Ohio's quality charter schools. But these quality schools are at a breaking point. They spend more than they receive, and they make up the gap mainly through community support. This is not sustainable.

I urge you to support the budget proposal to provide funding for Charter Schools of Quality. I know from experience that Breakthrough is a great school, and I'm sure there are other great charter schools as well in Ohio that can make a similar difference.

I also urge you to support the inclusion of "Wellness funds" which provide wraparound services that can be accessed by charter schools. This is vital funding to provide for children most in need of support.

Thank you for your time today, and listening to my experience. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.