



HB 33 Interested Party Testimony
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House Finance Committee
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Chairman Edwards, Vice Chairman LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for allowing us to testify today as interested parties on House Bill 33, the state biennial budget bill. I am Lannie Davis-Frecker and I am the President and CEO of Julie Billiard Schools, a network and community of schools with campuses in Lyndhurst, Akron, Westlake, and soon to be in Brecksville. We are here today as a coalition of catholic and private schools that accept and educate students on the Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships. Each of our schools operates as a nonprofit, tuition-based private day school for students. We all have programs within or dedicated to children with learning disabilities such as mild to moderate autism, ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, and other social difficulties beyond education, and beyond expectations.

Julie Billiard Schools serve students with special learning needs. We strive to build self-confidence, inspire Christian values, and empower Kindergarten through eighth grade students with skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm for life-long learning. We focus on the whole child and address his or her academic, social, spiritual, and emotional needs by offering onsite therapies of speech, occupational therapy, behavior, art, and music. Our individualized learning programs are adapted to meet the unique needs of our students, allowing them to become successful learners. Our students are loved, accepted, and given a sense of belonging, and are expected to work to their potential, regardless of their abilities. We create relationships and collaborate with our students' families to ensure continuity, offer support, and build community.

My name is Sharee Brandler, and I represent Bridgeway Academy's 220 students from 26 school districts and 10 counties. Bridgeway Academy programs range from Potty Training to Job Training and all of the academic, life, and vocational skills that fall in between. Families come to Bridgeway for a variety of reasons. Some parents have a newly-diagnosed 3-year-old, and are looking to give her the best early start possible, with the hopes that they will be able enroll their daughter in their neighborhood school in the near future. Some are parents of a middle schooler who is struggling in his typical school setting and are seeking a place where their son can work with a teacher who understands his unique learning needs.

Bridgeway Academy classrooms have an average student to teacher ratio of 2:1 to accommodate unique learning styles. In addition to teachers, each student has a Speech, Occupational and Physical Therapist – along with a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst and Mental Health Clinician on their team – working to ensure each child can reach their highest potential. In a survey completed earlier this month, 40% of Bridgeway Academy families meet the federal standard for a free or reduced lunch. We strive to keep our tuition as low as possible for families, while still providing our highly-trained teachers and therapists competitive wages and benefits.

My name is Gregory Boerio, and I am the Executive Director of The Paula and Anthony Rich Center for Autism at Youngstown State University. The Rich Center combines the latest in the autism research and best practices with the most innovative theories in education to help children ages three to 21 years with autism reach their full potential. The Center is an externally funded unit of Youngstown State University, serving as a conduit between the University, educators, and health and human service professionals. As a component of the Beeghly College of Liberal Arts, Social Sciences & Education, The Rich Center for Autism also prepares educators, medical specialists, and other professionals in best practices for teaching and caring for these special people. All services, including core academics, interventions, speech and language therapy, applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy, social-emotional learning, vocational/life skills development, and more are provided to students at no cost to families.

The Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships are critical to our success and the success of the schools we are here to represent. The programs empower parents who feel their public school isn't serving their child's needs with the ability to choose the best educational environment for their children. Quality education options are particularly important to parents of special needs children. Many schools cannot or do not provide the services needed for children with autism and special needs. When a parent realizes their special needs child needs additional support, the scholarships offer them hope that their child will have a brighter future.

Unfortunately, unlike the other voucher programs in the as-introduced version of HB 33, the special needs scholarship amounts remain unchanged. We have proposed an amendment that would increase the Autism Scholarship from \$32,445 to \$37,000 in FY 2024, and \$38,110 in FY 2025, a 3% increase. The amendment would also increase Category 6 of the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship from its \$27,000 cap to match the Autism Scholarship's proposed funding amounts, as well as increase Categories 1 through 5 by 30% in FY 2024 and 3% in FY 2025.

An increase to the Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships is instrumental in ensuring the success of all Ohio's children, and in helping providers to expand programming to serve more families. We encourage the legislature to increase funding for the special needs scholarships and remove the cap so that our schools can continue to serve the most special of our school-aged children. Thank you for your time today and we would be happy to answer any questions that you have at this time.