

Committees:

Commerce and Labor
Constitutional Resolutions
Finance
Financial Subcommittee on
Higher Education, **Ranking Member**
Insurance
Rules and Reference

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Assistant Minority Leader
Ohio House District 1

Chair Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 164, "The Foster-to-College Scholarship Act." This bipartisan legislation is crucial for Ohio to support foster youth in their pursuit of higher education, aligning us with 35 other states that already offer similar scholarships.

Currently, according to the Children's Defense Fund Ohio, our state trails the nation in terms of outcomes for those in foster care. 40% of young Ohioans who experienced foster care do not have a high school diploma. While children in foster care are less likely to graduate high school and enroll in post-secondary education, they are also more likely to experience homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system. These trends are indicative of a widening achievement gap that need addressing.

By implementing this bill, we can help change these statistics and provide foster children with the means to pay for college, starting them on a path of academic and career achievement. This legislation has been carefully refined in collaboration with higher education stakeholders, and the higher education subcommittee. We ensured the State will cover the necessary costs after other grants and scholarships have been utilized. In total, the estimated annual cost of \$7.5 million is a small fraction of our overall scholarship spending, and an investment worth making to ensure the success of some of the state's most vulnerable students.

College graduates in our state earn nearly double the income of their high school educated peers, and Ohioans with a college education experience higher employment rates. They contribute to building a strong workforce, a thriving economy, and showcase the immense economic benefits that come with obtaining a degree. The transformative power of higher education is evident and would be felt Statewide with the passage of this legislation.

When we consider the intergenerational impact of higher education, the importance of this bill becomes even more pronounced. Studies have demonstrated that children whose parents attended college are significantly more likely to pursue, and successfully complete, their own higher education. By supporting foster youth in their journey towards college or university, we can empower them to break the cycle of limited opportunity, and create a brighter future for generations to come.

In closing, I will leave you with the words of Columbus State Community College student Caidyn Bearfield, who is a former foster youth:

“The community of young adults with lived experiences in foster care deserve to be invested in. When given the opportunity, students from foster care backgrounds choose to serve their communities and this positive momentum compounds. Please invest in our futures and give us a fighting chance- I think that you will be amazed at the good things we are capable of when our circumstances allow us to thrive.”

Thank you for considering the importance of "The Foster-to-College Scholarship Act." Its passage will help Ohio's foster youth overcome barriers, achieve their educational aspirations, and build successful futures for generations of Ohioans.