

Division of Diversity and Belonging at BGSU  
Proponent Testimony for HB164  
October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Chair Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Finance committee, thank you for allowing me to submit proponent testimony for House Bill 164.

HB164 would create a scholarship program for students who experienced foster care at age 13 or later and wish to pursue higher education. The scholarship would be used as last dollars to bridge any gap remaining for the cost of attendance after the student receives federal, state, institutional, and/or private financial aid. According to Forward Steps, a Colorado based organization that assists foster youths with pursuing post-secondary education, 70% of foster youth aspire to attend college but only 15% enroll and 3% graduate. This is in stark contrast compared to their general population peers who obtain a degree at a rate of 24%. Even with the financial aid programs currently in place, many students who experienced foster care still have some remaining cost to attend college. This scholarship would help alleviate this burden and encourage this vulnerable population to consider their college options.

Through the Independent Falcon Network (IFN), Bowling Green State University supports independent students (i.e., students who are emancipated minors, foster youth, independents as wards of the court, or orphaned; students who have unique family circumstances; or students who are homeless/facing homelessness). IFN is a staff-led mentoring program that pairs student mentees with faculty and staff mentors who serve as a support system for students, connect them with campus and community resources, and help them navigate their college experience. The program is dedicated to the success of students who have experienced foster care and is committed to ensuring that, with our support, these students can have a successful academic career and grow into leaders in their chosen professions. Students enrolled in IFN meet with their mentor(s) throughout the semester and receive a \$50 stipend for their participation in the program. It is our goal that by participating in IFN, students will gain access to unique scholarship opportunities that can alleviate barriers due to housing concerns, food insecurity, and funding course-related expenses.

In addition to the IFN, students who have experienced foster care can connect with the Student Assistance & Advocacy Specialist (SAAS) through the BGSU Counseling Center and with Student Support Services (SSS). The SAAS will help with finding off-campus social service resources, getting connected with on campus resources, planning ahead to identify housing needs, navigating university procedures/offices, and obtaining other supports on campus. SSS is a federally funded TRIO Program that provides advising; individual tutoring; academic support in reading, writing and math; and financial resources. SSS was created to promote educational access for students who, among other identities, have experienced foster care.

With supports like the ones BGSU provides, students who have experienced foster care—who are less likely to have a family member or mentor in their life guiding them through the complex process of college applications and the FASFA—have a better chance at achieving success. Alleviating the financial barrier to attendance would be an incredibly impactful first step to eliminating some of the challenges facing Ohio's youth with experience in foster care. This scholarship can provide a clear and accessible path to higher education for these youth. We are grateful for this thoughtful piece of legislation and urge support and swift passage of HB164.