



# children's defense fund ohio

## Finance Subcommittee on Higher Education

HB 33 – Interested Party Testimony

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Chair Manning, Ranking Member Jarrells, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Higher Education, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 33. I am here today to discuss HB 33's budget provisions in support of scholarships.

My name is Kim Echart and I am the interim director of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. Born out of the civil rights movement, with more than four decades of advocacy behind us, it is the mission of the Children's Defense Fund to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness. We recognize that every child contributes to the vibrancy and success of our communities and are therefore driven to ensure every child and young person has opportunities to gain the social, economic, cultural and political capital they need to flourish into adulthood and give back to their communities.

HB 33, as introduced, does much to invest in youth as they prepare to transition to adulthood and pursue post-secondary options. One of the most significant investments is the Ohio College Opportunity Grant, with a proposal to increase both the award amount and the number of students who are eligible. In addition, the Merit Scholarship program offers awards for the top 5% of students to encourage them to attend college in Ohio. We applaud these investments in our youth.

As an organization, CDF-Ohio represents students who face the biggest barriers to postsecondary education. No young person's dreams and future aspirations should be deferred due to challenges created by poverty, abuse, and neglect. These students require additional support to even consider that college is an option, and ensuring every young person has options to pursue their career goals is not only morally just but in the best interest of our state's future prosperity, too. I was thrilled to see the Governor's proposed Mentoring Scholarship Program and the data that show that at-risk youth with a mentor are 36% more likely to enroll in postsecondary education. For years, I have been a mentor to high school students with a background in foster care, and I know from experience that a caring adult can make a huge difference in a young person's life. But more is still needed for those who face the toughest odds--students who, through no fault of their own, have experienced abuse or neglect and are placed in foster or kinship care.

Sadly, Ohio trails the nation in outcomes for teens who were in foster care – according to national data, Ohio youth were less likely to graduate high school or get a GED, obtain employment, be enrolled in school, and more likely to be justice-system involved than their peers across the nation. Ohio is in the bottom 10% of states across each of these measures. Scholarships for youth with experience in care can address these negative trajectories by giving

students hope and footing for a fulfilling future. Research shows that students who know they can pay for college are more likely to aspire to attend. Aspiring to attend college also motivates students to stay in school and keep their grades up.

During this budget, Ohio has an opportunity to join over 35 other states who offer scholarships to students with experience in foster care. Texas has had tuition waivers since 2015 and evidence since the establishment of this program shows that reducing financial barriers increases the likelihood that a student will complete their degree. A recent study shows that students who take advantage of Texas's policy of waiving all tuition and fees are 3.5 times more likely than their peers to graduate with a postsecondary degree. Imagine how much Ohio could benefit from helping more students in our state access opportunities to obtain the skills necessary for the 21st century workforce given the growth and partnership with new businesses that have come to Ohio over the past several years.

The state of Connecticut has been offering scholarships since at least 1968. I know that because my mom emancipated from foster care in Connecticut and the state paid for her to attend Marietta College here in Ohio. I also attended Marietta College because they offered me a scholarship as the daughter of an alum. My own story makes clear this type of investment can have lasting impacts on future generations.

Today, 55 years after my mom received her scholarship, I am asking you to do the same for the young people of Ohio. I encourage you to adopt an amendment to HB33 to waive tuition and provide for the full cost of attendance for students who have been in foster care. This is not as costly as it sounds, because there is already a patchwork of aid available to students from federal, state, and private sources. Tuition waivers knit together this patchwork so that students don't have to navigate complex financial aid processes on their own.

This policy can have a multi-generational impact, as I have personally experienced, and is a fiscally responsible investment in the future of Ohio. I encourage you to make a commitment to support all students to achieve their highest potential. I appreciate having the opportunity to provide testimony today and I would be happy to answer any questions that you have. Thank you.