



Senate Finance Committee

SB 182 – Establish Foster-to-College Scholarship Program
Proponent Testimony, June 25, 2024

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and esteemed members of the Senate Finance Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding House Bill 164. My name is Michael Outrich. I am a foster care alumni with the organization Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now (ACTION Ohio), and a former member of the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio (OHIO YAB) Youth Advisory Board.

It has been my honor as a former foster youth to establish a program at Ohio University to support students with a history of out-of-home placement, including foster care, kinship care and adoption. Both my personal experiences and that of my peers I assisted through their undergraduate studies informs my perspective on this bill.

While I was living in a group home and attending high school, I always aspired to attend college. I had no understanding of scholarships, or what the financial costs of college might be... I just knew that if I wanted to become an urban planner, it required at least a four-year bachelor's degree.

My high school guidance counselors did not have the time or knowledge to proactively share resources such as Education Training Vouchers, that exist to support foster youth in pursuing higher education. Although the federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires school districts throughout the nation to identify a District Foster Care Liaison to support students in grades K-12, more training and a standard procedure for local school district liaisons is needed, particularly when it comes to high school.

As this bill proposes, establishing a full-time School Foster Care Liaison within the Ohio Department of Education is an excellent step forward. This position will play an integral role in developing and sharing standardized training and expectations. Their leadership can help to ensure that individuals designated on paper as ESSA Liaisons truly are knowledgeable about foster-care-related resources and have the time and capacity to properly assist foster care youth.

Likewise, creating a Foster Youth to College Scholarship Program to support the post-secondary success of students with a foster care history will create a ripple effect of improved outcomes, including college retention and avoidance of unnecessary debts.

When I was accepted by Ohio University, the group home manager drove me down to drop me off and say his final goodbyes. He said, “Now begins that next chapter of your life – make the most of it.” And then he left. I wasn’t sure what to do next. I had my class syllabus and my schedule, and that was pretty much it. No guidance or support. So, I supported myself, and ended up ultimately developing a campus program to help others; the Ohio Reach Scholars program at Ohio University.

But in that moment, for me, as with so many other students with a foster care history, I felt incredibly alone. There was so much that I didn’t know. A few weeks into the semester, I received a notice that I needed to see the financial aid officer due to a tuition shortfall. I was told that I was short \$10,000 and that I needed to take out some additional loans as part of my financial aid package. As a freshman who was never previously introduced to the concept of credit or loans, I signed the promissory note so I could continue my classes.

It wasn’t until two years after that I began to realize what I was getting myself into. I had borrowed over \$35,000 by this time, with a mix of subsidized and unsubsidized loans. It was time to move off campus and because I did not have a cosigner, I was required to pay the full years’ worth of rent up front in full to secure an apartment. To avoid devolving further into debt, I lived on a shoestring budget, skipping meals, hand-washing my clothes and focusing only on work and school. Throughout this time, I remained on the Dean’s list and worked as a part-time undergraduate researcher.

I wouldn’t wish that life on anyone, especially former foster youth who have limited resources and childhood trauma already. I was fortunate enough to have mentors offering words of encouragement. I did not want to be another statistic and I worked hard to prove to all of those who said I would never amount to anything. As of today, I have attained a Master’s degree in urban planning from The Ohio State University and a Bachelor’s degree in Geographic Science from Ohio University. But the road to this destination has been rocky and difficult. I want better for today’s youth.

If the Foster Youth to College Scholarship Provision had been available at the time, it would have provided “last dollar” support after my grants and scholarships had been applied. It would have saved me debt and significant peace of mind.

Creating a Foster Youth to College Scholarship Program will significantly improve post-secondary outcomes for students with a foster and kinship care history. With support, higher education outcomes for our population can and do improve, as exemplified by the recent graduation rate of students in the Columbus State Network of 50% (in contrast to the national rate of 5%). This particular support is vital for the matriculation, retention and graduation of former foster youth.

I appreciate having the opportunity to provide testimony today. Thank you for your time.

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