

Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 129
Senate Health Committee
Emily Benson, 4th Year Optometry Student
Ohio State University College of Optometry
April 24, 2024

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health Committee, my name is Emily Benson and I am a fourth year optometry student at The Ohio State University College of Optometry and Immediate Past President of the American Optometric Student Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 129.

I was raised in Twinsburg, Ohio, and although family moves landed me in St. Augustine, Florida, Ohio has always been home. I knew from a young age I wanted to become a medical practitioner in some regard, so I spent time shadowing multiple doctors, including an optometrist. As someone who has worn glasses since I was young, I always loved going to my local optometrist for a comprehensive eye exam. I always knew I wanted to return to Ohio and was excited to be accepted to The Ohio State University College of Optometry, which is consistently regarded as one of the top schools in the country.

The process of becoming an optometrist is long. In addition to four years of undergraduate coursework, optometry school is a four-year doctorate level program. Our first year of school focuses on the human body, with specific emphasis on physiology and systemic diseases. The next two years consist of intensive coursework in ocular disease, pharmacology, and the ocular implications of systemic disease including diabetes, autoimmune disease, and cancer. Third and fourth year of optometry school have a strong clinical emphasis. According to my patient log, I have cared for over 2,000 patients during optometry school, which includes rotations through our school's advanced clinics, the Salt Lake City VA Hospital in conjunction with the Moran Eye Center, and at private optometry and ophthalmology practices in Columbus, Newark, and Athens. During those clinical years, all optometry students take board examinations by the National Board of Examiners in Optometry. The written board exams are Applied Basic Science, Patient Assessment & Management, and Treatment & Management of Ocular Disease. There is also an in-person practical exam in Charlotte, North Carolina, that assesses our clinical skills and decision-making. There are other examination parts, the injection skills examination and the laser and surgical procedures examination that students may elect to take per their state's scope of practice and licensure requirements. Optometry board exams are known to be particularly challenging, but Ohio State consistently ranks at the top for boards passage rates. My class had the highest boards passage rate in the country for the written examinations, and we are eagerly awaiting the results once everyone completes the practical portion. I achieved passing scores on all parts of our board examinations, including a perfect score on the injections skill examination, which tests procedures I am not currently able to perform in the state of Ohio.

At Ohio State, excellence in leadership is just as important as excellence in the classroom. Because of my passion for this career, I became President of the American Optometric Student Association, which is our national student association across North America. There, I was entrusted to lead the over 7,000 optometry students in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. I know students at all 23 American optometry schools, and deeply understand what is important to students across the country when deciding where to practice. Scope of practice is always a top concern. In school, we are trained to the highest scope a Doctor of Optometry can practice, and we would like to be able to treat our patients to the high clinical standard that we learn in school.

Following my graduation from optometry school next week, I will be completing a residency in ocular disease at the University of Virginia. The main reason I ranked this program first was its location in a state that had expanded scope of practice that included laser surgery and minor lid lesion procedures. I am sad to be leaving Ohio, the state that I so desperately wanted to return to, but I know that being in Virginia will allow me to further my knowledge of more advanced treatments and procedures that I learned in school and fall within the scope of practice for Doctors of Optometry in Virginia, including those procedures outlined in Senate Bill 129.

Patient care and safety are of utmost concern for Doctors of Optometry everywhere, and I wouldn't be here today if I wasn't confident in my and my classmate's abilities to perform these procedures safely and effectively. Modernizing the scope of practice for Doctors of Optometry in Ohio can help minimize healthcare deficits in the state and improve the overall quality of care that Ohioans receive by minimizing wait time and driving distance to a capable eyecare provider. For these reasons, I urge you to support Senate Bill 129. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in support of this bill, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.