

House Children & Human Services Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
Kim Eckhart, Educational Service Center of Northeast Ohio
March 5, 2025

Thank you, Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify in support of including the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program (House Bill 25) in House Bill 96.

My name is Kim Eckhart, and I am a volunteer advocate with Foster ACTION Ohio. I am not an alumni of care. My inspiration to be an ally and to advocate on behalf of youth in foster care comes from my mother, who emancipated from care in the 1950s.

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 obtain a GED, secure employment, or be enrolled in school, and were 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 maintain strong academic performance.

Ohio has an opportunity to join over 35 other states that offer scholarships to students with experience in foster care. Texas has had tuition waivers since 2015, and evidence since the establishment of its 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. We respectfully request that the Committee include funding for House Bill 25's Foster-to-College Scholarship Program in House Bill 96, ensuring waivers for tuition and providing 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 do not have to navigate complex financial aid processes on their own.

This policy can have a multi-generational impact, as I have personally experienced, and it is a fiscally responsible investment in the future of Ohio. I encourage you to make a commitment to support all students in achieving their highest potential.

Thank you for your consideration. We urge you to include this appropriation in House Bill 96. Thank you.