

Chairman Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Education, I am the executive director of Adaptive Sports Ohio and I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony on House Bill 96.

It has been our privilege to work with the Ohio Legislature during the last five budget cycles to promote change and provide interscholastic wheelchair basketball to students with physical disabilities. Starting as just an idea in 2015, we moved from a pilot program with one team to a league including thirteen school districts: Austintown, Beavercreek, Boardman, Centerville, Cloverleaf, Jackson, Tallmadge, Wooster, Massillon, Plain, Perry, Wadsworth, and North Canton. In addition to the provision of equipment and enclosed trailers, our organization works in conjunction with each athletic director to organize the season schedule, refine the playing rules, train coaches and officials, and organize post season playoffs.

On Saturday, we concluded the 2024-2025 season, hosting the state championship at Kent State University. The Jackson Polar Bears and the Tallmadge Blue Devils were the top two teams in the league and played in front of an audience of nearly 500 people including 5x Paralympian and 3x Gold Medalist, Steve Serio. The event program from the state championship featuring all of the league teams has been included as part of my testimony today. It was a thrilling game all four quarters, with Tallmadge defeating Jackson 41-29. Katherine McKinley from the Ohio Department of Education assisted with the presentation of awards to our champions and runners-up.

As part of our advocacy for wheelchair basketball and disability awareness, since September, our organization has conducted gym class takeovers in 25 schools, providing more than 10,000 students with and without disabilities the opportunity to experience wheelchair basketball. Through these events, perceptions about disabilities are changed, and peers without disabilities gain more respect and admiration for their peers with disabilities.

Fueled by the support our organization received from the State, we are accomplishing what we've set out to do: work alongside school districts to create opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in sport and improve their social, emotional, physical and academic outcomes. This program is successful and I am proud to have Zayne Hammoudeh with me here today to share what being on a school team means to him. Every student with a disability, like Zayne, deserves the opportunity to play school sports and wear their school colors.

While sports are a privilege and not a right, the Rehabilitation Act insists that interscholastic activities be afforded equally to students with and without disabilities. Our program here in Ohio demonstrates that this is possible. Zayne's story is one of many that demonstrate why it is so important. With the groundwork we've laid in the last 10 years, we are ready to expand and reach even more youth with disabilities. Our goal for the upcoming school year is to increase to 20 participating districts and we are confident that it will be attainable. Adaptive Sports Ohio has not relied solely on State dollars to fund this program, but has leveraged it to gain foundation and corporate support to generate the full resources necessary.

We are grateful that this program has been included in the Governor's budget and thankful that the Ohio Legislature has invested in it over the last ten years. We respectfully ask that the adaptive sports program ODE earmark in the FY26-27 budget remain and sustain our important work. Thank you all for your consideration and I am happy to answer any questions at this time.