



House Finance Committee

House Bill 96

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Abigail David, Executive Director, Bridgeway Academy

Dr. Michael Latessa, Executive Director, The Rich Center for Autism

March 12, 2025

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today as interested parties on House Bill 96, the state biennial budget bill.

My name is Lannie Davis-Frecker, and I am the President and CEO of Julie Billiard Schools, a network of private, nonprofit schools with campuses in Lyndhurst, Akron, Westlake, and Brecksville. We have been serving this student population for 70 years and in the past 10 years we have grown to multiple campuses because the need is great and our services provide a unique model and approach to learning for this student. Even with growth, we obtain a substantial waitlist.

We are here today as a coalition of private and Catholic schools that accept and educate students using the Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships. Each of our schools operates as a tuition-based day school, providing specialized programs for students with learning disabilities such as mild to moderate autism, ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, and other social and educational challenges.

At Julie Billiard Schools, we serve students with special learning needs by fostering self-confidence, inspiring Christian values, and equipping kindergarten through eighth-grade students with the skills and enthusiasm for lifelong learning. Our holistic approach addresses academic, social, spiritual, and emotional development, with onsite therapies including speech, occupational therapy, behavioral support, art therapy, and music therapy. All of our teachers are licensed intervention specialist and our teacher to student ratio is 6 to 1 and 8 to 1 in the upper grades. Each student benefits from a tailored learning program that meets their unique needs, helping them succeed. We emphasize creating a sense of belonging, building relationships, and collaborating with families to ensure continuity and support.

I am Dr. Michael Latessa, Executive Director of The Paula and Anthony Rich Center for Autism at Youngstown State University. Our center integrates the latest autism research with innovative educational practices to help children aged 3 to 21 reach their full potential. As an externally funded unit of Youngstown State University, we serve as a bridge between the university, educators, and healthcare professionals. Through our affiliation with the Beeghly College of Liberal Arts, Social Sciences & Education, we also prepare future educators and specialists in best practices for supporting individuals with autism. Our students receive comprehensive services – including core academics, interventions, speech and language therapy, applied

behavior analysis (ABA), and vocational and independent living skills development – all at no cost to families. We serve students from 4 counties in Ohio and 1 in western Pennsylvania, representing 23 different school districts.

My name is Abby David, representing Bridgeway Academy, which serves 250 students on the Autism Spectrum from 33 school districts across 9 counties. Our programs span from potty training to job training, encompassing all academic, life, and vocational skills in between. Families turn to Bridgeway Academy for various reasons – some seeking the best early intervention for a newly diagnosed 3-year-old, others looking for an alternative learning environment for a middle schooler struggling in their current school setting.

Bridgeway Academy's classrooms maintain a 2:1 student-to-teacher ratio to support diverse learning styles and behavioral needs. Each student receives support from a dedicated team, including a Speech, Occupational, Physical and Music Therapist, as well as a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst, and a Mental Health Clinician. A recent survey showed that 40% of our families meet federal guidelines for free or reduced lunch, underscoring the need to keep tuition as low as possible while ensuring competitive wages for our highly trained teachers and therapists.

The Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships are essential to our success and to the schools we represent. These programs empower parents to choose the best educational environment for their children when public schools are unable to meet their needs. For families of children with special needs, access to quality education is crucial. Unfortunately, many schools lack the resources or expertise required to provide adequate services. When parents realize their child requires additional support, these scholarships offer the hope and the opportunity for a brighter future.

However, current funding for these scholarships falls short. It does not meet the needs of our students, address teacher shortages, or keep up with rising costs. A 2022 Ohio Department of Education study found that providing "best practice" support for students with autism costs over \$38,000 per student, with costs even higher for some disabilities. Yet, the maximum scholarship funding remains at \$32,445 – a gap that has only widened due to inflation. Schools are struggling to bridge this shortfall while also ensuring that their teachers and therapists receive competitive wages, preventing staff shortages that would further limit access to essential services.

To address this, we ask for your support of an amendment that would remove the funding cap on the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, increase funding for Category 6 of the Jon Peterson Special Needs and Autism Scholarships to \$37,659, and implement annual cost-of-living adjustments for both scholarships. These recommendations would allow schools to expand services and capacity, retain and recruit specialized educators and therapists, keep tuition affordable, and enhance and sustain high-quality programs. We urge the legislature to take action so that we can continue supporting Ohio's most exceptional students.

Thank you for your time, and we welcome any questions you may have.