

Testimony of Caisha Abdullahi
Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
March 11, 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Caisha Abdullahi, and I serve as the Legislative and Outreach Coordinator for the Ohio chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-Ohio). I am submitting this testimony on behalf of CAIR-Ohio, the nation's leading Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, to express our strong opposition to SB 1. I am also a recent graduate of The Ohio State University, where I earned degrees in International Studies and Public Policy Analysis.

As I prepared this testimony, I struggled to decide what title to wear today—because this bill attacks from so many different angles and affects so many communities, including my own, in deeply personal ways.

As an organization committed to justice, civil rights, and equitable opportunity, CAIR-Ohio is alarmed by SB 1's unprecedented government overreach into higher education. This bill threatens free expression, academic independence, and civic engagement—values that are foundational to our democracy and essential to the communities we serve.

CAIR-Ohio opposes SB 1 because it seeks to dismantle programs that promote fairness, representation, and equal access to education. DEI initiatives are not about exclusion or favoritism; they exist to address the systemic barriers that have long marginalized certain groups, including Ohio's Muslim community. Through our work, we witness these barriers firsthand—students facing religious discrimination, struggling to obtain basic accommodations, or feeling isolated in environments that fail to reflect or support them. DEI programs provide the necessary framework to combat bias, foster inclusion, and ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed. Eliminating these initiatives does not create a neutral or merit-based system—it reinforces inequities and strips institutions of the tools they need to address them.

On a personal level, I know what is at stake if SB 1 passes. I would not be standing here today as a recent graduate if not for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) and the programs that supported students like me—first-generation, Black, visibly Muslim, and navigating spaces not designed with us in mind. My college journey began at the height of the pandemic, when uncertainty defined every aspect of life. ODI helped me navigate the challenges of a massive university like OSU, providing mentorship, scholarships, and career development opportunities that I may not have otherwise known existed. These initiatives not only helped me thrive academically but also ensured that my university acknowledged and addressed the unique challenges faced by students from underrepresented backgrounds—from securing religious accommodations to confronting bias in the classroom.

SB 1 would take these vital resources away from future students who need them just as much, if not more, than I did.

This bill does not strengthen Ohio's higher education system—it weakens it. It sends a message to students from diverse backgrounds that they do not belong. It makes Ohio's universities less competitive in attracting top talent. And at a time when businesses and institutions across the country are investing in diversity because they recognize it as a driver of success, SB 1 takes our state in the opposite direction.

On behalf of CAIR-Ohio and the communities we serve, I urge you to oppose SB 1. Equity in education benefits everyone, not just those it directly serves. I ask you to reject this attempt to roll back progress and instead invest in policies that uplift all Ohio students.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions.