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Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 25, The Foster-to-College Scholarship Act.

Last General Assembly, this legislation passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support, 85 to 5. And today, I'm proud to share that more than 42 members of this body have already signed on as co-sponsors, affirming what we know deep in our hearts: that foster youth in Ohio deserve to be seen, heard, and invested in.

House Bill 25 is simple, but it is powerful. It creates the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program, providing a pathway for young Ohioans who spent time in foster care after the age of 13 to pursue higher education or skilled trades without the crushing barrier of cost. It fills the financial gap after all other grants and scholarships are applied, ensuring that the doors to opportunity stay open. It invests not just in four-year degrees, but in community college, apprenticeships, credentialing programs, because we know that success looks different for everyone.

The bill also funds full-time foster care navigators, people dedicated to walking alongside these students, helping them apply, enroll, and succeed. And it establishes a full-time liaison in the Department of Education and Workforce to help foster youth stay connected during their K-12 education.

And all of it, all of it, comes at a modest investment of \$7.5 million a year. A fraction of our state's higher education budget. But an investment that will ripple across lifetimes.

Because the reality is, the need has never been greater.

Today, according to the Children's Defense Fund of Ohio, 40% of foster youth in our state do not have a high school diploma.

Today, foster youth in Ohio are three times more likely to experience homelessness within a year of aging out of the system.

Today, many young people aging out of care face unemployment, untreated trauma, and isolation, through no fault of their own.

And the dreams they dare to have, the dreams we encourage all young people to carry, are too often derailed by barriers they did not build.

When you grow up in foster care, stability isn't promised. Belonging isn't guaranteed. College can feel like an impossible dream.

And too often, once they age out, these young people are met not with opportunity, but with silence.

But it does not have to be that way.

Thirty-five states, including Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama, already offer college scholarships to foster youth. But here in Ohio, we have not yet made that commitment. The data is clear: when we invest in foster youth, they rise. A study of Texas' scholarship program found that participating foster students were 3.5 times more likely to complete their degrees than their peers. Here in Ohio, we know that college graduates earn nearly twice as much as those with only a high school diploma. And we know that education doesn't just transform individual lives, it transforms families, neighborhoods, entire communities. It expands what's possible.

That's why I'm so proud of this legislation.

When Ohio steps into a child's life, when we say, "We will care for you", we don't make a temporary commitment. We don't make promises with expiration dates. We owe it to these young people to see them through, not just to their 18th birthday, but through the beginning of the life they deserve.

I want to end by sharing the words of Caidyn Bearfield, a student at Columbus State Community College and a former foster youth, who captured the heart of this moment. She said:

"The community of young adults with lived experiences in foster care have been through a lot and deserve to be invested in. When someone can get on their feet, they choose to serve their communities, and this positive momentum compounds. Please, invest in our futures and give us a fighting chance at independence. I think that you will be amazed at the good things we are capable of when our circumstances allow us to thrive."

Colleagues, we have the power to change the narrative for foster youth across Ohio. We have the chance to say to them:

"We see you. We believe in you. And we are willing to invest in your future."

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee, Thank you for considering the importance of The Foster-to-College Scholarship. It's now my honor to pass it over to my amazing joint sponsor, Representative Sharon Ray.