Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Abdullahi, and members of the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 644. My name is Chad Aldis, and I serve as Vice President for Ohio Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a nonprofit education policy think tank committed to rigorous research and promoting high expectations for all students.

Ohio has made meaningful progress in expanding access to higher education, but access alone does not guarantee success. Too many students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, enroll in college but do not complete a credential. That reality carries real consequences for individuals, families, and the state's workforce. House Bill 644 represents a practical, research-driven effort to improve those outcomes.

Overview of House Bill 644

At its core, House Bill 644 is about encouraging colleges to invest in strategies that have been shown to work. The bill creates a dedicated fund and competitive grant opportunity that allows public institutions to pilot, expand, and evaluate programs aimed at improving student success.

Rather than funding initiatives based on good intentions alone, the proposal emphasizes approaches supported by credible research and measurable results. Institutions seeking support must clearly articulate how their proposed efforts will improve outcomes such as retention, completion, and time to degree, and how those efforts will be evaluated over time.

The bill also places a strong focus on serving students who face the greatest barriers to success, ensuring that new investments are aligned with Ohio's broader goals around equal opportunity and workforce readiness.

Why Evidence-Based Investment Matters

We are not starting from scratch when it comes to improving college completion. A growing body of research shows that certain types of student support—such as structured course pathways, proactive advising, and targeted financial assistance—can significantly improve both graduation rates and long-term earnings.

One of the most compelling examples comes from Lorain County Community College's SAIL program, which is built on the nationally recognized ASAP model. Evaluations of the ASAP approach in Ohio found that students receiving these supports completed degrees at substantially higher rates than their peers—35 percent compared to 19 percent after three years (and 46 percent to 31 percent after eight years).

The benefits extend well beyond graduation. Years after participating, students in these programs are earning more, with average wages about 14 percent higher than comparable students who did not

receive the same support. These results demonstrate that well-designed interventions can meaningfully change students' trajectories.

Why a Competitive Grant Program Makes Sense

House Bill 644 takes a disciplined approach by requiring institutions to compete for funding based on the strength of their proposals. This ensures that resources are directed toward colleges that are ready to implement thoughtful, research-backed strategies and not just another mandate that puts another program on their plate.

This structure also helps address a common challenge in higher education finance. Ohio rightly rewards institutions for improved outcomes in its funding system, but there can be a delay between when a program is launched and when those results actually generate improvement. A targeted grant program can help institutions cover the upfront costs needed to get effective programs off the ground.

In this way, the bill supports innovation while maintaining accountability. Colleges must define clear goals, measure progress, and plan for long-term sustainability beyond the initial grant period.

Conclusion

House Bill 644 is a strong example of policy grounded in evidence and focused on results. It creates a pathway to extend a successful program in Lorain while at the same time opening the door to more innovative efforts. By encouraging institutions to adopt proven models, Ohio can move more quickly toward a system where student success is the norm rather than the exception.

This bill will likely help more Ohioans earn meaningful credentials, improve their economic prospects, and contribute to the state's long-term prosperity.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.