



Senate Education Committee

Substitute House Bill 96

Sharee Brandler, Director of Business Operations, Bridgeway Academy

Guadalupe Bright, Parent of Students at Bridgeway Academy

May 14, 2025

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Substitute House Bill 96. My name is Sharee Brandler, and I am the Director of Business Operations at Bridgeway Academy, which serves 250 students on the Autism Spectrum from 33 school districts across nine 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. I'd now like to introduce Guadalupe Bright, the mother of two boys who attend Bridgeway Academy.

Good afternoon. My name is Guadalupe Bright, and I am a mother of two beautiful boys on the autism spectrum. We began using the Autism Scholarship during the summer of 2024 to help with the costs of our oldest summer camp at Bridgeway Academy to prevent regression. We've continued to use the scholarship to ensure our son has the well-rounded services not available at his public school. The Autism Scholarship has allowed our oldest to receive all needed services including occupational, physical and speech therapy during school hours. It has helped him progress in his social skills and is now able to parallel play with other kids. When he began services through the scholarship he could only communicate in single words and mostly to express his needs and wants. Less than a year later he can say 3-word phrases to express needs, wants, actions and much more. Our youngest son has started ABA and therapy services at Bridgeway as well. Our family has benefited from the Autism scholarship, and we know of many other families whose children have great gains due to the scholarship. I thank you for your time and ask for your continued support and funding for the Autism Scholarship.

The Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships are not just beneficial programs – they are foundational to the success and sustainability of schools like ours. These vital initiatives empower parents by giving them the freedom to choose the most appropriate and supportive educational environment when traditional public schools are unable to adequately meet their child’s unique needs. For families of children with disabilities, this choice can be life-changing. It represents not only access to education but also access to dignity, equity, and the opportunity to thrive.

The reality is that many schools, even with the best intentions, lack the necessary resources, training, and personnel to deliver the level of support required by students with complex learning and developmental challenges. When parents come to the difficult realization that their child needs specialized support, these scholarships offer more than financial assistance – they offer hope. They provide families with the means to pursue a brighter, more promising future for their children, in environments that are equipped and committed to helping them reach their full potential.

A 2022 study by the Ohio Department of Education highlights the scope of this challenge. It found that delivering “best practice” support for students with autism alone costs over \$38,000 per student annually – with expenses even higher for students with other intensive disabilities. This substantial gap between the actual cost of services and current funding levels places immense pressure on schools. We are constantly working to bridge this financial shortfall while ensuring our highly trained teachers, therapists, and specialists receive fair and competitive compensation. Without this, we risk staff turnover and shortages that would further hinder our ability to provide consistent and effective care to our students.

We are appreciative that the House budget includes a proposed increase to the Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships – from \$32,445 to \$34,000. However, to truly meet the growing demand for specialized education and to address rising operational costs, we respectfully urge the Senate to go further. We ask for your support of an amendment that would increase the scholarship amounts to \$36,000 in Fiscal Year 2026 and \$37,000 in Fiscal Year 2027, with annual cost-of-living adjustments.

These much-needed increases would allow schools like ours to expand capacity, invest in essential resources and staff, retain top-tier professionals in special education and therapy fields, keep tuition affordable for families, and enhance the quality and sustainability of our programs. This investment is not just in schools – it is an investment in children who deserve every opportunity to succeed, regardless of the challenges they face.

Please note that Julie Billiart Schools and The Rich Center for Autism at Youngstown State University submitted written testimony in support of this amendment as well. Thank you for your time and consideration, and we welcome any questions you may have.