

House Bill 96
Testimony – Interested Party
Senate Education Committee
May 14, 2025

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96.

My name is Lynn Esmail and I am the Executive Director of OptimALL Services. I have been serving individuals with disabilities for the last 25 years. I have been with OptimALL Services, a scholarship provider for the last 7 years.

OptimALL is located in Cincinnati, serves 195 students in nonpublic schools on the Jon Peterson Special Needs or Autism Scholarship. We hire Intervention Specialists, Paraeducators, Speech Therapists, and Occupational Therapists, and we handle all of the administration and follow up with districts and schools. We serve students with almost every type of disability.

The Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship is divided into funding categories. Category Two is the largest category for both OptimALL and the state, approximately 78% of Jon Peterson Scholarships are Category 2, serving kids with specific learning disabilities and OHI (Other Health Impairments) such as ADHD, executive function, etc.

Often, we do not realize the importance that every intervention dollar has on a student with a learning disability.

In fact, in 2019, 85% of students who dropped out of school had a learning disability.

Three major challenges that contributed to students dropping out of school were:

- poor academic performance,
- inability to keep up with coursework, and
- lack of individualized support.

And we can help resolve all three challenges!!!

We can remedy or control with early, specialized interventions.

Keep in mind, to qualify for a Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, the student must undergo an evaluation and if needed, the public district will create an individualized education plan, or IEP. All Jon Peterson students must have an IEP.

It is difficult to be identified with a learning disability. The process is long with rigorous testing and evaluation and the data has to be extremely clear. There is no gray area for individuals on IEPs. **These students need specialized services from quality staff!** There are great costs associated with having Intervention Specialists, Speech Therapists, and Paraeducators on site to serve students with learning disabilities.

Like the public schools, it is difficult for us to find qualified intervention staff.

But unlike the public schools, and without local aid, we rely almost entirely on the Jon Peterson Scholarships and tuition for necessary services.

Likewise, we do not receive Ohio literacy grants – focused on critical reading intervention.

The Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship is a vital, essential tool for us to keep licensed, specialized teachers and therapists on site to meet student needs.

Your scholarship increase will directly address the Ohio Board of Education's task force to combat the school drop out rate.

- Students who drop out of school are more likely to be incarcerated.
- Nationally 66% of state prison inmates with learning disabilities did not complete high school.
- In Ohio 42% of incarcerated youth are identified as having special needs.
- So our SLD Category Two students {w/ ADHD, executive function, make up *24% of these prisoners.*
- The annual cost at a state prison is \$45,771.

In the end, the Jon Peterson Special Needs (or Autism Scholarships) are a vital tool to provide early intervention to students with special needs.

Let's make a relatively small investment in the lives of students today, and give them a headstart on a bright and productive future.

Citations:

K12Dive. (2023, April 12) How Ohio plans to boost special education graduation rate.
<https://www.k12dive.com/news/Ohio-boost-special-education-graduation-rates/647426/>

Ohio Board of Education Creates Task Force to Combat School Dropout.
Vinsonedu.com. June 20, 2019.

Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children With Disabilities. (2006, December) Special Education and Juvenile Justice: An overview and analysis of prevention and intervention policy and program developments.

Schwartz, Amy Ellen, Bryant Gregory Hopkins, Leanna Stiefel. (2019). The Effects of Special Education on the Academic Performance of Students with Learning Disabilities. (EdWorkingPaper: 19-86). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University:
<http://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai19-86>