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**Testimony on House Bill 96**  
**Senate Education Committee**

Wednesday, May 14, 2025

Chairman Brenner and Members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you so much for allowing me to appear today to advocate for the students and families that receive the Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs (JPSN) scholarships. These scholarships are crucial to ensuring that students with special educational needs can access the educational setting that best fulfills their therapeutic and educational needs. On behalf of the New Story Schools family of schools, I am here today to ask you to join me in supporting an amendment that proposes additional increases in funding to the scholarships to match actual funding needs.

New Story Schools – which operate in 12 locations across the state under the New Story name as well as Applied Behavioral Services and The Learning Spectrum – provide an academic learning environment integrated with behavior support services for students ages 4 through 21 experiencing social, emotional, educational, and behavioral challenges. We adapt our curriculum, intervention, therapies and teaching styles to meet the needs of each individual student. Our goal is to help each student reach his or her full potential, and live a productive, independent life. Our schools accept students as out of district educational placements and recipients of the Autism and JPSN scholarships. We are proud to serve families from locations in Hamilton, Montgomery, Butler, Licking, Franklin, Cuyahoga, Erie, Fairfield, Athens, Lucas and Pickaway counties.

Our model is special. It is our goal to provide an authentic school experience for our students. Our students deserve access to the same experiences as their neurotypical peers and the ability to talk about their school day in the same way their siblings can. We apply behavioral analysis and therapeutic interventions in the classroom setting while allowing for all the additional aspects of school- we have sports teams and talent shows and just last week, I attended a few of our proms. In addition, our schools partner with public school districts to provide collaborative support to students who struggle in the traditional school setting, often with the goal of helping them work their way back to their home district. Currently, we have 12 locations in Ohio, but we are being asked to expand our services every day. To help support education, we also offer in-home services for students who need help transitioning back to an out-of-home setting. We also offer our inclusion program to private schools, so students and families don't have to choose between the supports they need for their learning challenges and their faith. We are currently partnering with a public school to bring our programming inside the district in 6 classrooms that will be tailored to our students' needs. This will help the public district with their rising costs and allow students to literally stay in their home district and we are opening a location in Toledo this fall because the community came to us and asked for this support. The reality is our waitlists are growing with the average school having a waitlist anywhere between 10-50 students.

Every day I witness our amazing staff making a difference for our students and their families. We have had students come to our schools who can't go to dinner with their families or attend their siblings sporting events due to their anxiety or behaviors. Our programs go above and beyond. I was actually with one of the leaders of one of our schools when a student's mom texted her to let her know that because of the work we had done with this student, creating social stories about what a soccer game looked like and helping him understand what to do if he became overwhelmed, the two of them had just sat through an entire soccer game. This mother finally got to see her other child play a full game for the first time! These differences and the impact on families is difficult to truly measure in numbers. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that every family who needs us has access and the ability to come to our schools and that we are able to continue to improve and expand our services.

The Autism and JPSN scholarships are foundational to our ability to provide an individualized, evidence-based approach that supports students with serious and complex behavioral and educational challenges. Unfortunately, we face the same challenges of inflation and increasing regulatory burdens as many other schools. And the growth in the scholarships has not kept pace with the rising costs to provide the quality, tailored educational program that our students and their families expect and deserve.

The current maximum amount of each scholarship is \$32,445 per student. The House version has proposed increasing the maximum amount to \$34,000 per student in both FY 2026 and 2027. We're asking for support of an amendment that would increase the scholarship amounts to \$36,000 in FY 2026 and \$37,000 in FY 2027, with annual cost-of-living adjustments. These increases would allow schools to expand their 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 programs. A 2022 study by the Ohio Department of Education 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. Further, while other states admittedly have vastly different funding mechanisms, to offer you a sharp contrast, in the other states that New Story operates, our students come with an average of \$80,000 in funding. Our amendment request is necessary for New Story to continue to provide the quality therapeutic and educational services our students require.

I hope you will join us and the students and families we serve in supporting this important amendment. I invite you to come see the difference we are making. We would welcome your visit anytime. Thank you again for your time and consideration today. I would be happy to take any questions the committee may have.