



Senate Education Committee
Substitute House Bill 96
Dr. Michael Latessa, Executive Director, The Rich Center for Autism
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 Dr. Michael Latessa, Executive Director of The Paula and Anthony Rich Center for Autism at Youngstown State University. Our center integrates the latest autism research with innovative educational practices to help children aged 3 to 21 reach their full potential.

As an externally funded unit of Youngstown State University, we serve as a bridge between the university, educators, and healthcare professionals. Through our affiliation with the Beeghly College of Liberal Arts, Social Sciences & Education, we also prepare future educators and specialists in best practices for supporting individuals with autism. Our students receive comprehensive services – including core academics, interventions, speech and language therapy, applied behavior analysis (ABA), and vocational and independent living skills development. We serve students from 4 counties in Ohio and 1 in western Pennsylvania, representing 23 different school districts.

We're encouraged to see that the House budget includes an increase to the Autism and Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships from \$32,445 to \$34,000. This reflects a meaningful recognition of the needs of students with disabilities. Still, to fully address the growing demands of this population and ensure the long-term strength of specialized education programs, we urge the Senate to take this further.

We are seeking your support of an amendment that would raise scholarship funding to \$36,000 in Fiscal Year 2026 and \$37,000 in Fiscal Year 2027, with annual cost-of-living adjustments moving forward. This increase would directly benefit the children who depend on these services for a tailored, high-quality education that meets their individual challenges and potential.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter and for considering this request. We are grateful for your leadership and continued support.