

**Senate Education Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96**

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Thank you, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, for the opportunity to testify today. I am here to express my strong support for including funding for Senate Bill 13, the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program, in House Bill 96.

My name is Rochelle Toth, and I serve as President of the Junior League of Columbus and as the Commuter Outreach and Engagement Manager in the Willie Young Senior Off Campus & Commuter Student Engagement Office at The Ohio State University.

In both capacities, I've witnessed firsthand the significant barriers foster youth and other underserved students face in higher education. Today, I urge your support for comprehensive interventions, including wraparound support services, last-dollar financial aid covering the full cost of attendance, and the establishment of a state-run navigator program to enhance retention and success for these vulnerable students.

Each year, approximately 1,000 Ohio youth age out of foster care, abruptly losing critical support systems. Having already endured trauma and instability, they now face serious mental health challenges that significantly impede their educational trajectories. Only about 60% of foster youth graduate from high school, and fewer than 3% complete college degrees. By nearly every measure, our current system is failing these young adults.

At Ohio State, many of the students I support are first-generation, low-income commuters. They navigate demanding jobs, long commutes, and challenging financial pressures, often sacrificing meals or textbooks to manage tuition or rent. The majority lack any safety net during emergencies or school breaks. These hurdles are exponentially greater for foster youth alumni who commute—if indeed they have a stable location from which to commute. Given that nearly half experience homelessness by age 21, their reality often includes juggling academics, employment, and housing insecurity, all while coping with significant trauma. Indeed, about 25% of foster youth alumni suffer from diagnosable PTSD.

We can, and must, do better. Effective strategies already exist. Wraparound support programs that provide holistic academic, emotional, financial, and life-skills assistance have consistently demonstrated improved retention and graduation rates for foster youth and similarly vulnerable student populations.

Community-based organizations like the Junior League of Columbus are prepared to partner with the state to amplify these critical services. Through initiatives such as our signature Bridging the G.A.P. project, Junior League members actively mentor and support foster youth aging out of care by providing life-skills training, household essentials, and ongoing advocacy. Photos from recent volunteer events accompany my written testimony to illustrate these efforts.

We strongly endorse the establishment of a state-run navigator program. This program would assign dedicated mentors or coaches to each student, connecting them directly to campus resources and offering stable, individualized support. Such navigator programs have proven highly effective at institutions nationwide.

Additionally, the Junior League of Columbus stands ready to bolster this initiative. Our volunteers can assist navigators in guiding students through the often complex and overwhelming college application and financial aid processes. We already conduct regular workshops every Tuesday, in partnership with Franklin County Children Services, and would gladly expand these efforts to maximize our impact.

Each year we delay action, another thousand Ohio foster youth risk falling through the cracks. The societal costs of failing these young adults—manifested in higher rates of homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and chronic dependency—far outweigh the investment required for prevention and support. As the Jim Casey Foundation highlights, “the most costly alternative available is to do nothing.”

Conversely, proactive investment now will yield significant long-term benefits, including a more educated workforce, stronger communities, and reduced public expenditures on social services. This is not only a fiscally prudent decision; it is a moral imperative.

The Junior League of Columbus is eager and fully committed to partnering in this critical effort. With urgency, practicality, and compassion, we can significantly improve outcomes for Ohio’s foster youth and underserved college students.

Thank you very much for your consideration.