

Imani Sparks
Junior Achievement of Northwestern Ohio
May 27, 2025

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and respected members of the Senate Finance Committee, I would like to thank you all for the privilege of speaking today.

My name is Imani Sparks, and I am a proud participant of the 5th Year by Junior Achievement program. Not only would I like to tell you what the Junior Achievement did for me but I also want to express my support for Junior Achievement funding in HB 96, which will help students across the state participate in meaningful programming to succeed in their future careers.

As high school was approaching the end, I was struggling with what to do next after graduating. College at the time felt financially out of reach, but I wasn't aware of any jobs that fit my passion for art in the Toledo area. Luckily during my senior year at Jones Leadership Academy of Business, Junior Achievement came and introduced the 5th Year Program. The program was more than just sitting in a classroom. It offered career exploration, life skills, professional development, and self-growth opportunities. Through Junior Achievement, we learned financial literacy while also living it and applying the lessons taught to us. Along with learning about careers in the Toledo area, we were also given countless chances to network with area companies.

I wanted to pursue art my whole life, and thanks to the 5th Year by Junior Achievement program, I was introduced to graphic design. I had a chance to work directly with professionals from the MadAveGroup for a paid internship that lasted a whole semester. There, I created my first graphic design piece. With this experience, I was taught what I needed to work on when it came to the work I did. I gained discipline, confidence, and a clear sense of my own values as an artist.

My peers in the program also discovered their passions, some in construction, some in finance, others in healthcare, and so many other career fields. Through the 5th Year by Junior Achievement program, we all felt seen, supported, and set up for success. This program is more than a mere steppingstone – it's a crucial program the youth should consider taking after graduating high school.

In order for the following generations to experience the beauty of this hands-on opportunity, Junior Achievement needs your support. Today, we're asking for \$1.25 million per fiscal year, not just to fund Junior Achievement across all counties in the state, but to invest in the futures of the youth. To give more young adults like me a path that empowers them at such an uncertain time in their lives.

Your support would directly provide young adults with access to dedicated mentors, hands-on learning experiences, real-world career exposure, and the kind of personal guidance that makes this program truly one of a kind. With your help, we can ensure that this becomes a consistent, transformative resource that continues to inspire our community.

Thank you for believing in our potential and for investing in the next generation of Junior Achievement trailblazers.