

Senate Health Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
Lisa Dickson, Communications Chair, Foster Action Ohio
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Thank you, Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Senate Health 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 Lisa Dickson. I serve as Communications Chair for Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now (ACTION Ohio). I also co-facilitate the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB), which is a statewide organization of young people (aged 14–24) who have experienced foster care. The OHIO YAB exists to be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that impact youth who have or will experience out-of-home care.

House Bill 25 includes two important provisions to improve educational outcomes for current and former foster youth in the state of Ohio:

1. Establishing a full-time School Foster Care Liaison within the Ohio Department of Education.
2. Creating a Foster Youth to College Scholarship Program to support the post-secondary success of students with a foster care history.

Supporting the K–12 Educational Success of Foster Youth

It's important to note that the federal Every Student Succeeds Act was initially rolled out in 2016 and requires school districts throughout the nation to identify a District Foster Care Liaison to support students in Grades K–12. Their role is:

- To coordinate with child welfare.
- To develop a process for making best interest determinations.
- To facilitate transfer of records and immediate enrollment.
- To support enrollment and regular attendance in school.
- To coordinate transportation.
- To provide professional development training for schools.

Unfortunately, these positions often exist on paper, but not in practice. Every school district differs in their approach. The role is often assigned to a principal or another staff member wearing many other hats. Training is offered but not mandatory. Although it is considered “Best Practice” for District Foster Care Liaisons to be proactive and make contact with foster youth in their district, there are no current accountability measures to ensure this takes place.

As a result, too few foster youth throughout the state of Ohio are proactively informed about who the Foster Care Liaison is in their district. During the 2022 October statewide youth advisory

board meeting, none of the participating youth had ever heard of or benefited from this resource. To quote directly from youth participants: “Why haven’t I heard of this before? There’s nobody there for me at school. I need someone who understands me as a foster youth specifically. I don’t have the parents I was born to, so I need more support.”

This leads to missed opportunities to improve the educational outcomes of Ohio’s foster youth. Ohio foster youth have reached out to State Superintendent Stephanie Siddons of the Ohio Board of Education, Kara Wentz of the Ohio Governor’s Office of Children’s Initiatives, and other state leaders to share their vision: “For Foster Care Liaisons throughout the state to be designated not only by name, but also by training, support, and by their daily actions to support our vulnerable population.”

Establishing a full-time School Foster Care Liaison within the Ohio Department of Education would be an impactful step forward. This individual could proactively reach out to Ohio’s 611 individual school districts. Not only are ACTION Ohio and the OHIO YAB strongly in favor of creating this position; both of our organizations would love to support whoever is hired to serve in this role.

Supporting the Post-Secondary Success of Foster Youth

The OHIO YAB and ACTION Ohio are strongly in favor of creating a higher educational financial assistance program to support the post-secondary success of students with a foster care history. We affirm the need for there to be no “age cap,” because life circumstances often delay post-secondary graduation for our population.

In 2017, an economic research study was conducted by the University of Cincinnati’s Economics Center for Education and Research. It followed Hamilton County foster youth outcomes between 2008–2015. This study demonstrated that investing in post-secondary supports for foster youth not only created a positive effect on social outcomes but also led to lower net costs per county. The return on investment for the one-year sample period was 248 percent.

Foster youth who received post-secondary support were more likely to graduate, obtain employment, and had a higher median wage. They were less likely to require social and emergency support services. These positive effects on social outcomes also contributed to lower net costs for the county. I would be happy to provide a copy of this research study.

On a personal note, I “aged out” of foster care early and started college at 16 years old. College and graduate school became the pathway to my future. I’ve been working full-time for the past 24 years, and it is my honor as a former foster youth to work hard, pay taxes, and contribute to the state of Ohio.

In closing, we respectfully request that the Committee include funding for Senate Bill 13’s Foster-to-College Scholarship Program in House Bill 96. Thank you for your consideration of this important program and for your time.