

Senate Health Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
Kim Eckhart
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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 Kim Eckhart, and I am a Research Manager with the Children's Defense Fund—Ohio. Born out of the civil rights movement, with more than four decades of advocacy behind us, it is the mission of the Children's Defense Fund to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness. We recognize that every child contributes to the vibrancy and success of our communities and are therefore driven to ensure every child and young person has opportunities to gain the social, economic, cultural, and political capital they need to flourish into adulthood and give back to their communities.

CDF—Ohio represents students who face the biggest barriers to postsecondary education. No young person's dreams and future aspirations should be deferred due to challenges created by poverty, abuse, and neglect. These students require additional support to even consider that college is an option, and ensuring every young person has options to pursue their career goals is not only morally just but in the best interest of our state's future prosperity, too.

Sadly, Ohio trails the nation in outcomes for teens who were in foster care—according to national data, Ohio youth were less likely to graduate high school or obtain a GED, secure employment, or be enrolled in school, and were more likely to be justice-system involved than their peers across the nation. Ohio is in the bottom 10% of states across each of these measures. Scholarships for youth with experience in care can address these negative trajectories by giving students hope and footing for a fulfilling future. Research shows that students who know they can pay for college are more likely to aspire to attend. Aspiring to attend college also motivates students to stay in school and maintain strong academic performance.

Ohio has an opportunity to join over 35 other states that offer scholarships to students with experience in foster care. Texas has had tuition waivers since 2015, and evidence since the establishment of its program shows that reducing financial barriers increases the likelihood that a student will complete their degree. A recent study shows that students who take advantage of Texas's policy of waiving all tuition and fees are 3.5 times more likely than their peers to graduate with a postsecondary degree. Imagine how much Ohio could benefit from helping more students in our state access opportunities to obtain the skills necessary for the 21st-century workforce, given the growth and partnership with new businesses that have come to Ohio over the past several years.

The state of Connecticut has been offering scholarships since at least 1968. I know that because my mom emancipated from foster care in Connecticut and the state paid for her to attend Marietta College here in Ohio. I also attended Marietta College because they offered me a scholarship as the daughter of an alum. My own story makes clear this type of investment can have lasting impacts on future generations.

Today, 55 years after my mom received her scholarship, I am asking you to do the same for the young people of Ohio. We respectfully request that the Committee include funding for House Bill 25's Foster-to-College Scholarship Program in House Bill 96, ensuring waivers for tuition and providing for the full cost of attendance for students who have been in foster care. This is not as costly as it sounds, because there is already a patchwork of aid available to students from federal, state, and private sources. Tuition waivers knit together this patchwork so that students do not have to navigate complex financial aid processes on their own.

This policy can have a multi-generational impact, as I have personally experienced, and it is a fiscally responsible investment in the future of Ohio. I encourage you to make a commitment to support all students in achieving their highest potential.

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.