

Senate Health Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 96
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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 Chauna Mason. I am a first-generation college graduate from a small town where people often underestimated my potential because of my family's social standing and makeup. I am passionate about providing young people who have experienced foster care with access to higher education because I believe in the power of education to open doors.

Ohio trails the nation in outcomes for youth in terms of post-secondary education. In 2021, only 12% of youth with experience in foster care in Ohio were enrolled in post-secondary education. The national average is twice that, though still only 24%. These figures come from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Fostering Youth Transitions 2023."

While I have not experienced foster care, I have faced challenges similar to those who have. Not being able to participate in extracurricular activities because I could not afford them. Not having the resources to take SAT and ACT prep sessions. Not being sure I could afford to take these tests. Moving so often that it was hard to build close enough relationships with faculty for them to write a compelling letter of recommendation. I also know what it feels like to not want to be a burden on others—knowing money was scarce, not wanting to bring up activities because my mom might say "yes," but who would drive me, and who would watch my siblings?

If not for the passion of individuals who believed in TRIO Programs—educational outreach initiatives designed to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds—I can confidently say I would not be standing here before you. What TRIO did for me is what House Bill 25's Foster-to-College Scholarship Program will do for young people who have experienced foster care. And as someone who has benefited from a government-funded program, I believe it is my responsibility to reach back and bring others along.

Senate Bill 13's Foster-to-College Scholarship Program will provide these young people with the support and resources they need to consider college as an option. They deserve the chance to have the full college experience, to be exposed to and mentally prepared for higher education. They deserve someone to guide them through the applications, financial aid packages, and acceptance letters. They also deserve the resources necessary to keep them in school—getting them there is not enough. Young people who have experienced foster care are as much a part of our future as their peers who have not. When they succeed, we all succeed.

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.