

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

Chaka Wilson

RISE Initiative, Fostering Achievement Network, The Ohio State University

May 15, 2025

Thank you, Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Timken, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher 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.

I manage the RiSE Initiative's Fostering Achievement Network at Ohio State University and have spent my career guiding students with lived experience in foster or kinship care toward college success. I speak not only as an educator but also as someone who has supported former foster youth in secondary and postsecondary school for almost twenty years.

Roughly 1,000 Ohio youth emancipate from foster care each year, and about 4,000 at any given time are of traditional college age. Yet only 435 received Chafee Education & Training Vouchers last year, a take-up rate of barely ten percent. Chafee ETV is one of the three primary scholarships currently available to foster youth, but too often these students leave money earmarked for them on the table due to a lack of knowledge and guidance, as well as surpassing age eligibility, for those who start college later in life.

I see the consequences up close. A tenacious student may piece Pell, Chafee, and Ohio College & Opportunity grants together, yet still come up \$11,500 short of covering the cost of attendance at Ohio State. Not every student must attend college; this bill also covers vocational training, technical schools, and community colleges. However, every young person should have the choice to chart their own future. If a determined foster alum wants to become a doctor, a lawyer, or a state legislator, and gains admission to Ohio State or another public 4-year institution, we must strive to make their dreams a reality.

As the campus liaison for the Fostering Achievement Network through Ohio REACH Postsecondary Network, I frequently encounter students who lack sufficient funds to complete their degree programs, despite receiving a patchwork of grants and scholarships. These students often face critical gaps in tuition and housing costs, leading to homelessness, food insecurity, and jeopardized futures. Despite a robust network of advocates, finding additional resources to support these students remains challenging. Without adequate financial support, students risk dropping out, left without a safe or productive path forward.

Consider how SB 13 mirrors the GI Bill, which provides tuition and a monthly housing allowance, recognizing that veterans need stability to study effectively. SB 13 applies this comprehensive logic to foster alumni—a population that has also served, only their "service" has been surviving childhood outside permanent families.

I believe in our foster youth because I have seen them persevere.

What holds them back is not grit or academic ability; it is uncertainty—about rent, dinner, or an overdue fee. SB 13 removes this uncertainty. While it requires an upfront investment, it will repay Ohio many times over through higher tax revenues and reduced public costs.

Thank you for considering this pressing issue. I am happy to answer any questions and trust in your recognition of the importance and long-term benefits of investing in current and former foster youth.