

Introduction: Chairman Oelslager and members of the Senate Finance Committee thank you for allowing me to speak today. My name is Lisa Followway and I am the Executive Director of the Adaptive Sports Program of Ohio. Our organization provides adaptive sports like wheelchair basketball, sled hockey, wheelchair racing and wheelchair rugby to individuals with physical disabilities across Ohio. Our programs differ from Special Olympics which is geared towards cognitive disabilities. I am here to testify in support of Sen. LaRose's amendment that would create pilot programs in two school districts and stress the importance of inclusion of school based adaptive sports.

First, access to sports is important for physical health. Children with disabilities are 3x more likely to be inactive than their able bodied peers. Inactivity is directly linked to the development of costly post-secondary conditions like obesity, high blood pressure and osteoporosis. Obesity rates in children with disabilities are 38% higher than children without. 18% of Ohio Medicaid enrollees consist of the aged, blind and disabled. This 18% makes up 50% of total expenditures. Providing an opportunity for students with disabilities to be active through school sports will improve their health and reduce healthcare costs. For example, last August, my son Casey, who is here with me today, underwent an extremely high risk spinal fusion. When the surgeon updated us post-op regarding the procedure, he said that Casey did not need a blood transfusion and his bone density was incredible. The surgeon said that this was extremely unusual and credited it to his involvement in athletics. Additional proof of the power of adaptive sports can be found in the Department of Veterans Affairs \$8 million dollar investment in sports for disabled veterans. Calling it a "cost effective program", the VA recognizes sport as a form of healthcare and a critical part of the rehab process.

Second, access to sports is important for academic outcomes. As OHSAA claims, sports are an extension of the classroom and intended to play an important part of a well-rounded education. According to the National Federation of High Schools, studies prove that students who participate in high school athletic programs have higher grade-point averages than students who do not participate. Yet, our most academically vulnerable population, students with disabilities, have a 68% Ohio graduation rate and do not have access to this academic benefit. Currently, there are 1,593 high school boys and girls basketball teams in Ohio, and 0 wheelchair basketball teams. Casey is a great example of academic success through sport. Casey was born with a disability and was on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) throughout high school. On Sunday, he graduated from Wooster High School cum laude. If you ask Casey, he will tell you that the only reason he worked hard is because he wanted to remain academically eligible to participate on his school track team. And, participation on his school track team did not come easy. Casey had many barriers to overcome in 2009 when he became the first student in Ohio to join his school track team. Through advocacy, OHSAA included wheelchair events at the state meet in 2013.

Lastly, access to athletics is required by law. Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, students with disabilities have a right to participate in extracurricular activities in school. On January 25, 2013, in response to a GAO study, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights provided additional guidance to school districts clarifying their existing obligations under Section 504. The guidance urges school districts to create additional opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in athletics. While there may currently be access to community based adaptive sports, this does not remove the schools obligation to provide them.

In closing, funding for this program would create a pilot program of district wide wheelchair basketball, wheelchair football and wheelchair handball that would assist schools in meeting their federal obligations and improve academic and physical outcomes for students with disabilities. \$250,000 is a very small percentage of Ohio's budget but it will have a significant on this vulnerable population.