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Testimony in Support of SB 256 Regards Sentencing Offenders Under 18 When Committed Offense House Judiciary Committee

Good morning Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee.

my name is Sajad Shakoor. I am actually a living testament to the power of prison education and the transformative effect it has on the individual. Additionally, I would like to show that redemption, when coupled with a second chance, can net society an individual who is both willing (in drive) and able (in capacity and wherewithal) to inherit his or her contributory role and act as an agent of change.

I was still in high school when I went to prison. I served a total of 21 (twenty-one) years of a 25-to-life sentence. While inside, I worked tirelessly to reform myself. I earned my GED and then went on to enroll in Ohio University's Prison Education program. I was only the second person in the entire hundred and fifty years history of San Quentin State Prison to receive a bachelor's degree from the Ohio University, and the first to do it with all my credits coming from inside. What makes this even more unique is that I earned my education, all \$14,000 worth of it, with handcrafted clocks and other artifacts that I would make out of newspapers, popsicle sticks, and anything else I could acquire. to pay for this education. These items would be sold to prison staff and visitors, with the funds going to OU. It took me well over a decade to finally finish my education.

Needless to say, it was because of the education and vocational programs that I participated in while incarcerated that I was able to get out and transition into society effectively. Even though I worked a few minimum-wage jobs to support myself while pursuing my PhD, I never saw those jobs as a dead end; rather, they were, for me, a means to an end. Because of my education and dedication to excellence, I was able to eventually open my first Falafel Corner restaurant and turn it into a franchise. I now own 20 of these with plans to go national by next year. I employ scores of people and am providing a meaningful livelihood, with prevailing wages, for numerous families. However, if it were not for the second chance that I was given, this talent would have rotted away behind bars. But for this second chance that I was given, this altruistic spirit would have died before it was even conceived. But for the second chance, this benefactor that I am today would have been – forever – a beneficiary. The success that I enjoy today and the benefit that I am able to convey to my community is a direct result of my years of preparation finally meeting the opportunity, the second chance.

I don't have to be the only one, though. There are countless other men and women inside who have exhibited the same desire for reform by pursuing their education or participating in vocational programs. I believe that SB256 allows these men and women to prove that redemption is possible, and that those individuals who so endeavor to cultivate their thinking and engender change in themselves, as well as their compatriots, are worthy of a second chance. Indeed, only those who strive to inherit the implements of change should be awarded the ultimate opportunity to manifest that change in society. I believe that the mechanisms of SB256 allow for the careful and thoughtful implementation of this.

