



# children's defense fund ohio

## Senate Finance Committee

HB 33 – Interested Party Testimony

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Kim Eckhart, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Am. Sub. House Bill 33. I am here today to discuss HB 33's budget provisions in support of child wellbeing.

My name is Kim Echart and I am the interim director of 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.

We have a saying, that children do not come in pieces, and neither should our policy and budget decisions when it comes to their overall wellbeing. We are committed to advocating for the prioritization of the whole child in the FY 24-25 Ohio budget, which includes ensuring adequate investments in the systems they rely on and the communities they call home. The budget is a moral document that is a reflection of our priorities as a state, and we must do right by our children and youth – the future of Ohio. We must ensure our budget invests in and protects essential programs all children need to live in dignity.

Ohio currently ranks 29th in overall child well-being, lagging in the bottom half of all states. One in 6 children in our state experiences poverty, as many as one in four in children in certain counties lives in a household that faces [hunger](#), and far too many children and adolescents across the state of Ohio continue to grapple with unmet basic needs that have caused soaring rates of chronic absenteeism (as high as 65% in the 2020-2021 school year for students who are houseless), dropping proficiency rates in school (especially along striking equity lines depending on what school district or building a child attends), and increasing gaps in an accessible continuum of care for health challenges.

Children's Defense Fund-Ohio in partnership with Ohio Excels and the Ohio Children's Hospital Association (OCHA) recently released a report on [Supporting Children's Behavioral Health in the Learning Environment](#). In this research, we found that 17% of youth 6-17 experience a mental health disorder, but only 51% of those youth actually receive treatment in a given year. The national suicide rate for adolescents ages 10 to 24 increased 60% and is now the second leading cause of death for this group.

According to the [2020-2021 National Survey of Children's Health](#), an estimated 58,000 school-age children in Ohio were not able to access needed health care. Although Ohio ranked 13th in access to mental health care for youth, more than half of children who experienced major depression did not receive mental health services and only 33% received consistent treatment. In Ohio, nearly 1 in 8 children received a diagnosis of anxiety, depression, or both in 2020, up 42% – the 10th highest increase nationwide. Further, among teenage girls nationwide, nearly 3 in 5 reported feeling persistent sadness in 2021 and 1 in 3 seriously considered attempting suicide. These disorders can be especially devastating to young people, impacting current health and school success and contributing to serious lifelong consequences impacting their families and their communities.

Amended Substitute HB 33 does much to invest in children and address their health and wellbeing and we applaud many of the provisions. I hope you will protect these critical investments in our children.

- **Consider the whole child** and the families they are part of when making investments. Behavioral health begins with strong families, strong schools, and strong communities. Our state funding decisions must lay the foundation for children's lifelong health and prevent the need for costly medical interventions down the road.
- **Prioritize child physical, mental, and behavioral health needs** by protecting the critical provision included in the Governor's budget to increase support of Medicaid for children whose household income is below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level.
- **Expand critical children's health access in Ohio's schools** by modernizing the Medicaid in Schools program to increase access for school-based children's mental health services.
- **Medicaid coverage of doula care services.** There is a strong and growing body of evidence that access to doula care during pregnancy reduces the incidence of preterm birth, the prevalence of cesarean births, and increases positive birth experience and healthy outcomes for both mother and child.
- **Ensure access to universal school meals for all Ohio children** to address alarming rates of child hunger. Currently, more than one in three kids that live in a food insecure household does not qualify for school meals.

As a member of the [The Ohio Children's Budget Coalition](#), a statewide group of 22 advocacy organizations committed to supporting the holistic needs of every child, we encourage you to reference the new [FY24-25 Biennial Budget Issue Book: Creating a Vision for Child-wellbeing for Ohio](#), which outlines 15 critical opportunities to improve child well-being in this budget. This can be referenced for further detail on the recommendations I have outlined today and others that ought to be considered to move the needle on child well-being in our state.

One key proposal that was not included is an investment for students with experience in foster care, specifically an amendment establishing the Foster-to-College Scholarship Act, [referenced as 135HB33-HC 135 2544](#).

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 get a GED, obtain employment, be enrolled in school, and 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 keep their grades up.

During this budget, Ohio has an opportunity to join over 35 other states who offer scholarships to students with experience in foster care. Texas has had tuition waivers since 2015 and evidence since the establishment of this 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 the enduring possibilities for intergenerational stability and opportunity that this type of investment can support and help realize for so many other Ohioans.

Today, 55 years after my mom received her scholarship, I am asking you to do the same for the young people of Ohio. I encourage you to adopt an amendment to HB33 to waive tuition and provide 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 don't have to navigate complex financial aid processes on their own.

This policy can have a multi-generational impact, as I have personally experienced, and is a fiscally responsible investment in the future of Ohio. I encourage you to make a commitment to support all students to achieve their highest potential. I appreciate having the opportunity to provide testimony today and I would be happy to answer any questions that you have. Thank you.

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