Good afternoon Senator Polehanki and members of the Education Committee. Thank you for your time today and your work in supporting Michigan teachers and students. Thank you, also, to Senator Camilleri for introducing SB 463 and advocating for better college access for Michigan students.

My name is Amanda Paulus. I teach 11th and 12th grade English at Sault Area High School in Sault Ste. Marie where I’ve spent all 13 years of my teaching career. During this time I’ve received district awards such as Rotary’s 2023 Secondary Teacher of the Year and Outstanding Teacher of Native American Students in 2019. I’m also a proud Michigan Teacher Leadership Collaborative alumna and am currently pursuing National Board Certification.

More than half of Michigan students are considered economically disadvantaged, and this statistic is perfectly mirrored at Sault Area Public Schools. Because of this, for some students it is a foregone conclusion that college, while worth attending, is too expensive. Four years ago, my student Kaela and I had this exact conversation at the beginning of her junior year. After a rough start to high school, she had only just realized a desire to further her education and took note of the hard work she’d need to put in both in the classroom and on the SAT in order to make this happen. While discussing all of this, the topic of cost inevitably came up—Kaela, who worked after school to help her single mother, saw cost as an insurmountable obstacle. It took a lot of convincing for Kaela to fill out the FAFSA, a task made worse by the difficulty and length of the chore itself. In her words, filling out the FAFSA the first time was “definitely interesting” and “super confusing…I couldn’t do it on my own.” It turns out Kaela qualified for quite a bit of aid that made college both affordable and attainable.

In 2022, approximately $94 million worth of Pell Grant money was left behind by Michigan students due to students not completing the FAFSA. Passing SB 463 supporting universal FAFSA completion as a graduation requirement is a step toward Michigan students receiving aid they’ve already qualified for, aid which is just waiting for them. It is also a step toward achieving Governor Whitmer’s goal of Sixty by 30.

It is pertinent, however, to not just implement this requirement without considering the support it will need to be successful. Therefore, I encourage you to also consider additional funding for school counselors and college advisors. It is ultimately these folks who will bear the brunt of educating students and parents about the FAFSA process, assisting in FAFSA filing, and supporting students with college pursuits. It would be shortsighted to pass such important legislation without ensuring there was infrastructure in place to make it happen.

Thankfully Kaela benefited from caring counselors and a dedicated MCAN advisor to help her through the FAFSA and college application process. Kaela is entering her 3rd year of college, and after trying a few majors on for size, has settled on pursuing a degree in education. She hopes to be in the classroom by next fall. I’m proud to say she is a perfect model of what can be achieved when students are educated on the FAFSA process and take advantage of the federal and state monies available which SB 463 would help ensure. Thank you again for your time and consideration.