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Testimony on Senate Bill 24
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Chairwoman Stillman, Chairman Fleischmann, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 24. My name is Maria Zambrano and I am the executive director of Excel Bridgeport, an advocacy organization in Bridgeport committed to making sure that all children in Bridgeport have the opportunity to attain a world-class education that prepares them for college, career and life. I am also a credentialed teacher in this state and a graduate of the Bridgeport Public Schools. I have lived the achievement gap in my own life and now work to eliminate it in my home community.

I want to frame my testimony by telling you a story about a little boy in Bridgeport. His name is Alejandro and earlier this year he entered kindergarten in the Bridgeport Public Schools. This should one of the most exciting times in a child's life. But in Alejandro's case, the sad reality is that he's already more likely to fail than he is to succeed. Because of the zip code he's in, he is more likely to go prison than to college. Because of the zip code he's in, he is more likely to end up on welfare than the Dean's List. Because Alejandro's in a school system that should be preparing him for college but instead is preparing her for prison or unemployment.

Two months into his school career, when it all should be before him, Alejandro already has a 50% chance of dropping out. And the longer Alejandro stays in the Bridgeport school system, the worse his odds will get. He'll enter 3rd grade reading at 1st grade level - if he can read at all. By the 4th grade, he's not reading Harry Potter, he's reading Green Eggs and Ham. By the 8th grade, he's still learning his multiplication tables, not the Pythagorean Theorem. If Alejandro graduates - and the odds are against him - then he'll graduate with the skills of a middle schooler.

3,000 Kindergartners like Alejandro entered Bridgeport Public Schools this year. 3,000 students destined to fail. Take a step back and picture is even grimmer. There are 20,000 students in the Bridgeport public schools. 20,000 Alejandro's across the city. And how do they stack up?

Only a quarter of our elementary school students in Bridgeport are reading at grade-level—a startling statistic when you learn that researchers have found that children who struggle to read by the third grade will probably never catch up.

At the secondary level, it's even more depressing. Only 1 and 10 high schoolers are on grade level - the worst rate in the entire state of Connecticut. To be more blunt, 90% of our high school-age children in Bridgeport are not on a path toward college. 90%. Imagine having to tell 4,000 high schoolers that their school system has failed them, that their education is inadequate, that it has not prepared them for living in the 21st

century. But that's what we do in Bridgeport every year. And Bridgeport is not unique. Statewide, Connecticut faces the same challenges.

Today we're at a turning point. Senate Bill 24 presents a rare opportunity to fundamentally change how our state's public education system works. It gives Connecticut an opportunity to:

- **Strengthen the teaching profession** by improving teacher preparation and support to increase the effectiveness of teachers prior to entering the classroom. This bill will also help Connecticut attract and retain the most effective educators by ensuring that teachers are evaluated based on their ability to successfully educate students, not on the number of years they spend in a classroom.
- **Provide diverse schooling options** for families (especially those facing limited choices in Connecticut's urban districts) by expanding high-quality school models and holding them accountable for student learning outcomes.
- **Improve the access and quality of early childhood education programs**, specifically in communities with high need for Pre-K learning opportunities. The achievement gap starts before the age of 5 and these programs are critical to stemming negative long-term academic and social effects.
- **Support dramatic improvements in the state's 25 lowest-performing schools** by providing the targeted interventions and supports necessary to increase student achievement in schools that have continually failed to adequately educate Connecticut children.

I urge you to pass Senate Bill 24. The futures of countless children across this state depend on the success of this bill. One day, because of the actions you take right now, Alejandro may be the first person in his neighborhood to finish college.