

Education Committee Hearing
Senate Bill 1096
Thursday March 18, 2015

FaithActs for Education
Rev. William McCullough, Board Chair
Jamilah Prince-Stewart, Executive Director

Good Afternoon Chairman Fleischmann, Chairwoman Slossberg and members of the Education Committee:

We are Rev. William McCullough, Pastor of Russell Temple CME Church in Bridgeport, CT and Founder and Board Chair of FaithActs for Education and Jamilah Prince-Stewart, Executive Director of FaithActs for Education, and we represent a group of pastors from Bridgeport who have come together to form this new organization. We sincerely regret that we are unable to be with you in person today as a group of 13 clergy leaders from Bridgeport have traveled to Memphis, TN to attend the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) Symposium.

FaithActs for Education is a grassroots organizing nonprofit based in Bridgeport, CT. We exist to help faith leaders and their congregations step outside their place of worship to advocate for improved educational opportunities for the children of Bridgeport. Founded in October, 2014, FaithActs exists to leverage the power of faith leaders within their communities and directly engage and educate parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles and all community members who have a direct stake in a child's life and education.

Bridgeport is ground zero in the fight to improve education in Connecticut. We exist in a state with the largest income and achievement gaps in the country. So many families come here from other states and other countries for better opportunities, and it is our belief that we have failed many of them. Bridgeport is the lowest performing school district in the state. This is not a reflection of our children, nor is it a reflection of the adults who raise them or the adults who educate them. Rather this is a harsh reality that we must all take responsibility for and do our part to fix.

Faith leaders from Bridgeport and urban districts have traveled to the Capitol over the past few years to fight for our children and ensure that each of them be given the opportunity to reach their God-given potential. We applaud the work of this committee over the past few years, the tough decisions you have made, and your relentless pursuit to always put children first. We are therefore, perplexed and saddened today that a bill has emerged in this committee that could reverse much of your progress and damage the lives of children, their families, and their communities.

We are here to strongly oppose Senate Bill 1096, and we ironically do so from afar at a gathering of thousands of black leaders, activists, and parents who are demanding options for their families and communities all across the country.

While our organization believes in school options and the right of every parent to choose the best school for their child, we are saddened that many choice conversations are often divisive and don't acknowledge that the vast majority of our children have and will rest in traditional public schools. Over 85% of Bridgeport students attend schools within district, 65% of them attend traditional public schools and over 10,000 of the roughly 20,000 students in district are currently being underserved. We must put all our efforts into making sure all children have great opportunities and educational success.

We reject the toxic dichotomy of us versus them that people have placed on our communities. We reject the idea that poor children and children of color must scramble for slim pickings while other children across the state have many good options to choose from. We will not allow one door, one opportunity to be shut in our children's faces. Not one! No one is going to tell us or our community what options we can or cannot have. No one has the right to make that choice or to block opportunity from our children.

How do we expect the children of Bridgeport to have a fair shot in this city? How can we tell families that poverty isn't destiny and they can achieve the American Dream if we can guarantee that only half of them will get a decent education? What message are we sending to the families of Bridgeport who need the most help, who need better options when we continually tell them to make due with less time and time again? With only 21% of Bridgeport public school 3rd graders reading on grade level (regardless of race or class), how do we expect to raise children to serve their communities and become future leaders? Are only 1 in 5 children in Bridgeport capable of reading? Is that what we think of our own children?

We've come before you in the past and acknowledged the tough decision that often lies ahead, but today, there is no tough decision to make. Any bill that blocks opportunity for children in the state with the largest achievement gap in the country is blasphemous.

Every public charter school in the city of Bridgeport is currently out-performing the district average. Forget the political games that adults want to play on the backs of children. These schools are working for our children and if you don't act and swiftly dismiss this bill and the damage it can do by crushing and halting opportunity in communities like Bridgeport, then our children's futures will be on your hands.