

Carl McCluster

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Education Public Hearing

*SB 380: An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the
Mastery Exam from Teacher Evaluations*

Monday, March 7, 2016

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann and members of the State Education Committee. I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon on important issues that define our schools, our communities, and our state.

My name is Reverend Carl McCluster and I currently serve in my 22nd year as the Senior Pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Our city has struggled through many educational difficulties and deficiencies over the years and I am deeply appreciative of the work of our state's leaders, including those on this committee, that have led and passed legislation designed to improve Bridgeport's ability to provide a high-quality education to our children. You've expanded access to high-quality schools and set the bar high with college-and career-ready standards. With all that has been accomplished, we will all agree that there is yet much to be done to hold onto these gains.

I believe that all of the children of Bridgeport have a right to equitable quality education. We must double down on our efforts to make sure that our children in Bridgeport aren't left behind at the starting line, and that our children receive a comparable education to their peers in more affluent areas. Despite our progress, we still have a long way to go. That's why today, I journey here to appear before you in strong and steadfast opposition of **Senate Bill 380: An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the Mastery Exam from Teacher Evaluations**. I speak in opposition because the families of Bridgeport need to be assured that their children, who for so long have been done a great disservice by our education system, don't see the progress we've made in recent years rolled back and not seen through to the fulfillment we have jointly agreed that our children deserve.

And that's what I think is so critical and is missing from this conversation, and what the proposal of this legislation neglects to consider. Connecticut has undoubtedly made progress in recent years, and a modern and effective teacher evaluation system fits well with those efforts. Understandably, the link between student achievement and the evaluation system has not yet taken place - but here we are today, debating the removal of it before the potential benefits and positive impact can even take place. We tell our children that the cream will always rise to the top. What are we saying to them when we discard evaluation of measurable results as a benchmark of understanding the effectiveness and value of the many teachers who do not fear making their earnest efforts and excellent accomplishment known?

This is not only reckless to the progress we've made in recent years, but is educationally unsound. If we are to pursue the development of an education system, and an accountability system, that works to help Connecticut close its pervasive achievement gaps and support the needs of all students, then it is critical we remain committed to that cause, and not prematurely back away.

A number of delays and the sheer proposal of this legislation perpetuates an idea that the link between student achievement and teacher evaluation will somehow be a disaster to educators across Connecticut. I simply don't believe that to be the case. At the end of the day, that is an unfair and unjust mischaracterization. In fact, I believe any system that can offer struggling teachers, especially those dedicated to improving their craft and student achievement in our hardest-hit communities, should be supported. We can look down the shoreline to cities like New Haven, in which the link with student achievement was enacted in 2009, to confirm that performance of both teachers and students rises when we include achievement in our evaluation system.

For these reasons, I ask you today to support a modern evaluation system and oppose Senate Bill 380. This is critical to closing some of the largest achievement gaps in Connecticut, and your commitment to the cause is imperative. Please, don't turn back now. We have come too far together; parents, students, teachers and legislators, to give in now to political back pedaling at the expense of our children's future.

By remaining committed to student achievement, and including that measure in accountability, we can show children and families in our most traditionally underserved communities that we will not leave them behind. We can show them that we believe in them just as much as we believe in any child. We show them that their zip code or the color of their skin does not have to define what they can accomplish in the classroom. We show parents that we are dedicated to ensuring the success of all our students in school, into college, and beyond into the workforce. And most importantly, we ultimately show some of our most vulnerable and high-needs children that they matter - when for far too long, the system has failed to do that.

We've undoubtedly come a long way in recent years. We simply can't turn back now. With that, I ask you all, please oppose **Senate Bill 380: An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the Mastery Exam from Teacher Evaluations**. Stand up today for the rights of our children, and the integrity of teachers who cherish their professional integrity over and above the paycheck that they receive. Help teachers who desire to do better to have a meaningful mechanism for measuring their success and need for improvement. Let us take a stand now to insure that our children and Connecticut's educational system measure up to the potential and value that we have committed to place in our children. Say no to this attempt to devalue both children and teachers by allowing those who are not committed to joining us in improving and developing the quality education system we all deserve slip by 'under the radar' of integrity through fair and unbiased observation and measurement.

Thank you.