Testimony of Subira Gordon, Executive Director of the Commission on Equity and Opportunity regarding SB 359 “An Act Prohibiting the Disaggregation of Student Data by Ethnic Subgroups in the Public School Information System” and SB 362 “An Act Concerning Remedial Instruction” in Reading before the Education Committee on Thursday, March 8, 2018

Senators Slossberg and Boucher, Representative Fleischmann, and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Subira Gordon and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut General Assembly’s Commission on Equity and Opportunity (CEO). The mission of the CEO is to inform and engage policy makers about constituent needs for the African American, Asian American, Pacific Islanders, and Latino and Puerto Rican populations in Connecticut. We are a legislative agency with a data-driven, cross-cultural approach to policy innovation, and our primary focus is to recommend legislation that aims at eliminating disparities by creating opportunities, building connections, and promoting change.

I am here today to speak about Raised SB 359 “An Act Prohibiting the Disaggregation of Student Data by Ethnic Subgroups in the Public School Information System” and SB 362 “An Act Concerning Remedial Instruction in Reading.”

I am concerned about the language in this bill (SB 359) because it limits disaggregation of data by ethnic groups, which for many reasons is problematic. In an education setting it is important to know which populations are being served by a school district or a particular school. For example, the limited categories available on the application e.g., Black, Caucasian, Latino… do not specify which part of the world you are from. An African immigrant who is black could be in need of ELL services, which are not needed for an African American student; therefore, we need that disaggregated data.

Connecticut has been a leader in education and, in many cases, has far exceeded basic requirements of the federal government so, on this issue, we should not limit ourselves. Race and ethnicity are important in determining where services are needed and who needs those services. In specific school districts there are certain needs based on cultural preferences which are rooted in a family’s ethnicity. One example is… “The American Community Survey of 2006, for example, reported a relatively low rate (14 percent) of Asians achieving less than a high school level education. However, disaggregating the data showed discrepancies. Specifically, among Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian populations, the rates of achieving less than a high school level education were more than double the 14 percent national average: 39 percent (Hmong), 38 percent (Laotian), and 35 percent (Cambodian) (Khan & Ro, 2009). This information could be used for customized outreach programs and to better inform teachers and other youth-serving providers about which students are at higher risk for lower academic success, information that could easily be missed by only looking at the broader Asian totals.” This information could also
be used to inform any needed adaptations to evidence-based programs used with these populations.” Connecticut should not be limiting data collection it should be expanding disaggregation to best serve the needs of all students in our schools.

It is critical to create safeguards to prevent data from being used in discriminatory ways. Instead of limiting disaggregation this bill should limit the way that data can be used and ensure that no student is discriminated against based on their country of origin. To protect the identity of students and their families, there are ways to ‘mask’ or ‘suppress’ data so only those who truly need this information will be able to access specific de-identified, disaggregated data. The development of data safeguards will benefit from the experience and expertise on the Education Committee.

SB 362 expands the implementation of remedial reading programs. This is critical for all students in CT who are struggling to reach reading proficiency. Minority students tend to be less likely than their white peers to be reading by 3rd grade. This deficiency carries through to high school. This bill ensures that all students in 4th, 5th or 6th grade who are not reading at proficiency are able to receive remedial help to ensure they are reading on grade level. This will benefit our struggling students.

Thank you for your time today, and I look forward to continuing to discuss this very important issue.