Good evening, Chairwoman Walker, Chairwoman Osten, Ranking Member Lavielle, Ranking Member Formica and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Jamilah Prince-Stewart and I am a constituent of Rep. Porter who is a member of this committee. I am the Executive Director of FaithActs for Education in Bridgeport, CT where Representatives Rosario, Baker, Santiago, and Senator Bradley, all members of this committee, reside.

We are people of faith building power to get our children the education they deserve. We believe that every child deserves the opportunity to graduate from college, take care of their family, and fulfill their God-given potential. We build relationships, we build leaders, and we build power through community organizing and civic engagement. We’re 473 members and 50 churches strong. We turned out 840 Bridgeport voters in last year’s election, 76% of our committed voters.

I am here tonight to support House Bill 7148 and Governor Lamont’s proposed K-12 education funding for 2020 and 2021. I’d like to thank the governor for his proposed increases to funding for Bridgeport: an additional $2,320,455 in 2020 and $4,863,720 in 2021. These dollars will allow us to fill teacher positions, higher paraprofessionals back in kindergarten classrooms, and provide our children with the basic resources (textbooks, paper, and technology) they need to succeed.

We specifically want this committee to maintain the governor’s proposed change to how we measure poverty. This budget proposes changing the identification method for low-income students from the Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) measure to direct certification. This small change results in huge gains for historically underfunded districts like Bridgeport. In Bridgeport, for the purpose of providing meals, the district counts 100% of its students as eligible for FRPL because 65% of Bridgeport children are low-income, and 35% live below the poverty line. 1 in 4 Bridgeporters are food insecure. While this helps the districts provide meals to all of its students, it means that less and less families are applying for FRPL because they automatically receive it in Bridgeport. So if FRPL is how we measure poverty in Bridgeport for the purposes of determining the amount we will received from the Education Cost Sharing Grant (ECS), we are missing so many kids that the state should be funding. Changing the measure to direct certification also allows Bridgeport to get funding for kids who are also on SNAP, HUSKY and other forms of support for low-income families. We urge this committee to protect this important change.

While we support the proposed increases, we are also morally obligated to note that it does not go far enough. Bridgeport is one of the poorest cities in the state. The average individual income in Bridgeport is $16,000, and Fairfield County is one of the the most economically unequal areas in the United States. Our schools reflect this extreme inequity. High-quality education opportunities are not uniformly accessible to children in Bridgeport. Only 25% of third-graders are reading on grade level, 10% of eighth-graders are doing math on grade level, and 16% of students who take the SAT are ready for college.

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1 US Census Bureau ACS 5-year estimate, 2015 DataHaven Community Wellbeing Survey
3 Connecticut Department of Labor
4 2015-16 SBAC test scores, 2016-17 math SAT scores from EdSight.ct.gov
As the law stands, education is a states right and we are fighting the same fight that we fought 65 years ago with *Brown v. Board of Education* and 20 years ago with *Sheff v. O'Neil*. Education funding is a civil rights issue, it is a social justice issue. It’s about resources. Bridgeport is currently the largest public school district in the state of Connecticut with 240 more students than Hartford. Yet it spends $14,241 per pupil compared to Hartford which spends $19,616. Schools of choice that are viable options for parents seeking an alternative to failing schools receive far less from the state for education the same children. If Bridgeport were funded like Hartford, it would receive an additional $111,477,500 in funding. If it were funded like Greenwich, it would receive an additional $152,812,320\(^5\). If how we spend our money shows us what we value, Connecticut doesn’t value black, brown and low-income kids.

We still have 11 different formulas to fund different types of public schools in Connecticut. That keeps our state divided and sends a message to children that some of them are worth more than others. We implore you to take bold steps this legislative session to address the underlying inequity in our public schools. Does this proposed budget do better for our children? Yes. Does it go far enough? Absolutely not. We look forward to work alongside you in the fight to give every Connecticut child the resources they need to succeed.