



Testimony submitted to the Appropriations Committee on H.B. 6439, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023, and Making Appropriations Therefor

Rev. Gabrielle Beam, Pastor, Mary of Bethany, Bridgeport, CT

March 9, 2021

Co-Chairs Senator Osten and Representative Walker, Ranking Members Senator Miner and Representative France, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Rev. Gabrielle Beam, and I am the pastor of Mary of Bethany Church in Bridgeport.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to speak. I'm here to oppose H.B. 6439 and Governor Lamont's proposed education budget. I'm also asking you to modify the budget to align with S.B. 948, which is currently in the Education Committee.

In 2015, after sending our youngest off to college, my husband, a PhD Physicist, and I moved to Bridgeport to pastor and to lend a helping hand wherever needed.

Shortly after arriving in Bridgeport, two chance encounters and a meeting about the wellbeing of children in Bridgeport changed the focus of our ministry.

The first encounter happened while ministering on the streets in the East End of Bridgeport with a colleague. We happened upon a young African American teenager named Theo, who had just started High School. We asked about his experiences in Bridgeport and how it was going in school. His eyes welled up with tears as he began to share that, "I'm not learning anything in school...there is nothing for me to do—no resources." Theo's eyes were haunting and pleading as he walked away saying, "Please, I just want an opportunity."

The second encounter was at a social in the basement of St. John's Church on the East End of Bridgeport. We were talking to another young African American male who was in the 12th grade. We asked what his plans were for the future, and he brightly offered with the greatest enthusiasm, that he wanted to go to college and become a chiropractor! We replied that's totally awesome, and asked how he was preparing to take his SATs. Though this young man was in 12th grade, he had not ever heard of an SAT.

The weight of these two stories was compounded when I learned during another chance meeting that nearly 76% of the children attending public schools in Bridgeport, cannot pass a third-grade literacy test. The results of such tests are used by the prison industry to determine how many cells would be needed for these primarily black and brown children as they matriculated through school. This tragedy is known to most as the school-to-prison pipeline.



I wholeheartedly implore you to modify the budget -- as a resident of Bridgeport, as a Connecticut voter, as a Black woman, and as a person of faith who believes in the goodness of all and the inevitability of justice.

This will open the door to more kids by making the definition of concentrated poverty more reflective of how people live.

The current formula doesn't cover my home city of Bridgeport, which is the most underfunded school district in the state as well as its largest.

It's absurd that a formula intended to address poverty doesn't apply to one of the state's poorest cities.

I take that back. It's not absurd. It's tragic.

Here's another tragic fact. I've read that there's a \$640 million gap between the way Connecticut funds schools that educate mostly white kids versus schools with 25% or more kids of color.

\$640 million dollars. That number is hard to fathom.

Do I need to tell you who pays for this tragedy? Our children, that's who.

Modifying the Governor's proposed budget will also increase the extra funds that districts receive for students who are English Language Learners. Children who are learning English need support, and the current formula just doesn't provide it.

Modifying the Governor's proposed budget will end discrimination against low-income Black and Brown children who attend magnets and charters -- all of which are public schools and yet are frozen out of the ECS.

Need I remind you that the overwhelming majority of students in these schools are Black and Brown?

Modifying the Governor's proposed budget will also end the phase-in for ECS funding. Right now, a 5th grader won't see the full effect until she finishes high school.

I am so happy and pleased that you all have the chance to make the budget reflect education justice.

The work now is to bring it home ... to the promised land.



Thank you.

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