

Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kendrick Walton and I writing on behalf of the African American Leadership Forum (The Forum), an organization dedicated to advancing the leadership and well-being of Black Minnesotans. We stand in firm support of this bill, H.F. 1660, which directs the Commissioner of Children, Youth, and Families to conduct a statewide needs assessment for out-of-school and youth programming.

Our communities, especially Black and other communities of color, have long faced disparities in access to quality educational and enrichment opportunities for youth. The barriers to accessing safe, supportive, and enriching out-of-school time programs are well-documented, and this bill presents a critical step toward addressing these inequities. We believe that this legislation will provide the necessary foundation to ensure that every young person, regardless of their background or zip code, has access to programming that nurtures their potential, broadens their horizons, and prepares them for future success.

The Forum has long advocated for the need to close the opportunity gaps that persist in our education system, especially for Black and other marginalized youth. Out-of-school programming plays a vital role in developing the social, academic, and emotional skills that are necessary for success in school and beyond. However, youth in underrepresented communities often face systemic barriers that limit their participation in these crucial programs.

This bill's emphasis on conducting a comprehensive needs assessment and identifying gaps in access is vital. The data generated will allow the state to understand where and why these disparities exist, enabling targeted efforts to eliminate them. This will also help ensure that youth programming is equitable, culturally relevant, and reflective of the needs of all communities, particularly those that have been historically underfunded and underserved.

H.F. 1660 recognizes the importance of community engagement in the evaluation process, which is especially important when working with populations that have been marginalized. Engaging youth, families, community organizations, and subject-matter experts in the process ensures that the needs and voices of those most affected are at the forefront of any recommendations.

Youth programming that extends beyond the school day can provide young people with essential life skills, mentorship, and opportunities for leadership development. For Black youth in particular, access to quality afterschool programs, summer enrichment activities, and other youth services can play a transformative role in helping them overcome challenges such as racial discrimination and economic hardship.

By assessing current programming and identifying where resources are most needed, the state can prioritize investments that will create more pathways for youth to thrive. This holistic

approach to youth development is critical for empowering the next generation of leaders in our communities.

The bill also provides for a dedicated appropriation to fund the evaluation and reporting process. We are pleased that the legislature recognizes the need for financial commitment to ensure that this assessment is comprehensive and impactful. We strongly encourage lawmakers to consider long-term funding solutions that will not only support the initial needs assessment but will also help implement the recommendations that arise from it.

The African American Leadership Forum supports this bill because it is a crucial step toward ensuring that Minnesota's youth—particularly Black youth—have access to the high-quality, enriching programs that will prepare them for success in school, in their careers, and as active members of society. We believe that every child in Minnesota, regardless of their background, deserves access to these opportunities.

We urge you to support this bill and to remain steadfast in your commitment to creating a more equitable and inclusive future for all Minnesota's youth.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kendrick Walton, Policy Entrepreneur Fellow