



Madam Chair and Members,

My name is Keziah Ojika and I am the Program Manager of the ConnectZ program at Girl Scouts of Minnesota and Wisconsin River Valleys.

I would like to thank the House Select Committee on Racial Justice and this committee for focusing on this important work. The Girl Scouts strongly supports these racial justice recommendations – especially in the education section – and the ConnectZ Program is a successful example of these recommendations.

In its tenth year, ConnectZ is adapted to **each** girl and community, providing social and emotional skill development, leadership opportunities, and supplemental STEM education in a culturally responsive way to under served and under resourced girls. This holistic program is provided at no cost to girls and families.

Last year, ConnectZ served nearly 3,000 girls across the Metro Area and southern third of the state - primarily girls of color. 90% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Our ConnectZ troops are staff-led by youth development professionals, and a majority of us identify as women of color.

For those who are wondering how the Racial Justice recommendations could look in practice, here are some examples using the ConnectZ Program:

- Our organization has worked in collaboration with schools and districts. When Rochester Public Schools was establishing their full-service community schools, it partnered with Girl Scouts River Valleys to determine nonprofit services tailored to the needs of girls of color from low-income communities.
- The ConnectZ Program challenges girls to be engaged in their community and build lifelong skills through civics and advocacy opportunities as well as essential financial literacy and money management.
- Me and the rest of our program leaders are women of color. We have training in youth development and are dedicated to the success of girls of color
- ConnectZ girls learn about different career paths and what success after high school can look like. By hosting programs in partnership with Dunwoody College and Century College, the ConnectZ girls meet and learn about women in trade and STEM professions as well as

available coursework.

- We provide guidance and assistance as girls apply to college and seek financial aid—often sharing our **own** experience navigating these systems.

The outcomes of this program are proof that these recommendations can work:

- Two in three of ConnectZ girls will be **1st**-generation college students;
- 73% of the ConnectZ girls are more confident as they have stronger social-emotional skillsets;
- In the St. Paul Public Schools, where 93% of program participants are girls of color
 - 91% graduate high school on time
 - And 7 in 10 girls utilize ConnectZ exclusively. That means this is the only leadership and college and career readiness program these girls are exposed to.

So, Madame Chair, the ConnectZ Program is an example that these Racial Justice recommendations **can** and **do** work. When the time comes to implement these education policy recommendations, the Girl Scouts encourages you to consider programs like these for partnership and investment.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.