Background/Relevance
The U.S. Census Bureau’s 2021 one-year estimates show that nearly 105,000 people in Cleveland, Ohio lived in poverty in 2021. Of those, more than 33,500 are children. At 45.5 percent, Cleveland has the highest child poverty rate of any large U.S. city with a population greater than 300,000. In conjunction with this statistic, 66 percent of Cleveland residents are functionally illiterate. Currently there are more than 16,000 kids in Ohio’s foster care system, including approximately 720 in Cuyahoga County (Pathways for Children and Ohio Department of Job and Family Services).

I have been in and out of foster care in Cleveland my whole life. People have come and gone—father and mother figures I thought would be permanent ended up letting me down. I was adopted when I was fifteen years old and two years later my adoptive parent kicked me out of her house. I wasn’t sure if I would be able to finish high school or even go to college. I was focused on figuring out a way to provide for myself and cope with the grief of losing yet another family. I was released from some of my suffering through the kindness of strangers. A host family, a woman who worked at my high school, took me in after some months of my being homeless during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the midst of all of these changes I began to write and explore my feelings. A few months after being forced out of what I thought was home, I self-published my first collection of poetry which I titled “To, Too Many Children: A Collection of Moments,” as a message to the nearly 3,000 other foster kids who might have had a similar experience in the city of Cleveland. The book went on to become an Amazon bestseller and at seventeen years old my life began to change for the better. I would like to give foster children in similar positions the emotional and literary tools to succeed as I have.

Project Summary
Foster kids aged 14-18 (grades 9-12) will learn to explore new ways of understanding themselves in relation to family structure and community through poetry. A foster child is a kid of many labels—deconstructing those labels and understanding them will empower the youth to move through the world with a new tenacity and a firm grip on their value as a member of their community and advocate for their own well-being and the well-being of others. Using poetry to create peace within themselves will enable them with the leadership skills necessary to be role models and spread peace in their communities.

Implementation - June 1 through August 27
I will teach a series of eight English workshops called the Take Care Initiative twice a week for two hours each, inspiring foster youth to sort through their feelings in accessible free form poetic expression. I will invite high school aged foster kids to explore new definitions of kinship and the meaning of family as a way to combat the emotional and physical instability in their lives. We will first establish a literary foundation for their exploration with works from Ocean Vuong, Nic Stone, Jason Reynolds, Brandon Alexander Williams, and others. We will also widen our literary horizons with poetry gleaned from Hip-Hop music. We will then use those readings to interpret aspects of the personal life of each student. After which, the students will be expected to write several poems over the course of instruction. We will also practice public speaking skills that will enable them to share their poetry with confidence.

For the first two weeks, June 1-15, I will be selecting students for the workshops. From June 15-30 I will issue them their supplies and give a brief overview of the kind of poetry they will be engaging with as well as encourage them to get to know me and their fellow classmates. Instruction will begin the first week of
Take Care Initiative
Exploring Kinship Through Poetry: How A Fluid Definition of Family May Save Lives
King Weatherspoon, Bowdoin College, Class of 2025, Cleveland Ohio, Summer 2023

July. Each section of the workshop will be two weeks long and is characterized by a question that after having engaged with the artistic material for that section, each student will be asked to answer the question with an original poem.

Timeline of Workshops (Beginning July 1, 2023)

**Weeks 1 and 2: What is Identity?**
Book: Ocean Vuong - On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous
Album: Kendrick Lamar - To Pimp A Butterfly

**Weeks 3 and 4: How Can I Self-actualize in a Hyper-racialized America?**
Book: Nic Stone - Dear Martin
Album: Joey Bada$$ - B4.DA.$$ 

**Weeks 5 and 6: Who Loves Me and Why?**
Book: Jason Reynolds - Long Way Down
Album: J. Cole - KOD

**Weeks 7 and 8: Does Anyone Care What I Have to Say?**
Book: Jason Reynolds - For Everybody
Album: Saba - CARE FOR ME

To accomplish this I will work with the Cuyahoga County Department of Child and Family Services as well as East Cleveland City Schools to gather a group of 15-25 interested students. I will work with arts organizations in the area such as Temple of Passions to secure a classroom where instruction will occur, as well as hire one other trained artist for their expertise and help teaching. I will secure a venue in the downtown Cleveland area where the students’ poetry could be showcased concert-style in a community event to celebrate their perseverance and artistic abilities. With the awareness that students will be exploring difficult emotional topics over the course of the workshops, mental health supports will be present to guide the students through their experience.

Anticipated Results
These workshops will culminate in a city-wide poetry concert, at which the students will invite their loved ones. It will be recorded and distributed widely across the internet. Because all participants will be foster children I will seek formal permissions from Cuyahoga County and/or the state of Ohio to film the participants’ poetry and distribute it across social media platforms. Should the students wish to pursue art further, the performance will serve as a nice centerpiece for their portfolio. This experience will help to empower the youth to tell their stories and advocate for themselves within the foster care system and in the world. They will reveal themselves to be capable advocates and changemakers who raise awareness within their communities with their artistic voices.

Project Director
My name is King Weatherspoon. I am a bestselling poet, author, Black empowerment essayist, activist, flash fiction artist, orator, entertainer, musician, and educator. I am the co-founder of L.L.K! Artistry, and the author of the titles "To, Too Many Children" & "The Anniversary of When I Ran Away." I have performed poetry at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and presented at the University Hospital's
Department of Radio Oncology with regards to DEIJ work, as well as opened for Cleveland Ohio Councilman of Ward 7, Basheer Jones. I have been contracted by the CityMusic Cleveland Chamber Orchestra and Members of the Cleveland Orchestra for poetry set to music to be used in concerts from 2021-2024. I am passionate about using language and poetry to create a better world.