

Written Testimony to the Education Committee, Raised House Bill 7348, March 12, 2007
Submitted by: Cheryl Smith and Beth Mohan
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Members of the Education Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to address you today in support of Raised House Bill 7348.

For 20 years, the Artists Collective has offered after school programming to Hartford's most at-risk youth. As one of the oldest after school program in the city of Hartford, youth receive training in the performing and visual arts and exposure to master artists and role models from both our community and the community at large. Our students live daily surrounded by poverty, crime, drugs, violence and a lack of enough positive adult role models. They've seen family members and friends quit school, yet they persevere. They do so because of their participation in an after school program that develops positive life skills, develops conflict resolution and communication skills, creates a knowledge and pride in their cultural heritage, develops artistic skills that involve team work, discipline and responsibility, and an opportunity to be acknowledged for their achievements through public performances.

Designed as a year-round program, youth with consistent attendance, good academic standing and respectful behavior throughout the school year often receive scholarships to attend the daily six-week summer program and at the age of 14 advance into the summer youth employment training program. Youth selected to become summer program participants become counselors in training for the younger children and student teacher trainees for the older students. Participants have learned that hard work and achievement can bring success and they rise to the occasion competing for those treasured spots.

National research and our own experience indicate that after school programs work. Our students graduate from high school, do not become teen parents, do not become involved in gangs, and avoid criminal activities including drug and alcohol use and sale. Agencies such as the Department of Children and Families, the Village for Families and Children, Wheeler Clinic and the Juvenile Detention Centers have all referred clients to the Collective's after school program. Our after school program consistently achieves an 85% attendance rate which means they are also meeting at least that same rate of attendance in school.

Public Hearing Testimony Speaker:
Beth Mohan

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In a study conducted by Philliber Associates, our after school program students' activities were measured at the beginning and end of the school year. The results indicated that few of our students reported smoking cigarettes, using alcohol or drugs or participating in sexual activity. The percentage engaged in gang activity dropped from 15% to 6% and shoplifting decreased from 13% to 10%.

We would like to share a few success stories out of many:

- Twenty-four (24) after school participants demonstrated so much artistic and personal growth that they auditioned and were selected as members of the *Repertory Performing Dance Ensemble*. Placement in this group is one of the highest honors within the organization. Participation involves intensive training, community-wide performing, self-discipline, and responsibility—values essential for the arts, the classroom, and life. Youth must maintain consistent attendance and good academic standing to remain in the *Ensemble*.
- Members of the *Repertory Ensemble* auditioned and were accepted into the Greater Hartford Arts Academy and several have participated in productions at Hartford Stage and the Hartford Children's Theater.
- This past year, 12 students who started in the after school program in 4th grade, stayed with the program until graduation from high school: 8 years. All are attending college.
- Twenty-five percent (25%) of after school participants this year received high academic honors.
- A number of after school participants have received citations, awards and recognition for their academic and/or artistic work. Some of their work has been published and/or placed in exhibit.

After school programming is more than recreation and academic activities in the afternoon. After school programs build communities, strengthen families and serve as an additional layer of support for youth by working with their families, schools, churches, health institutions and social service agencies to create responsible, educated and compassionate adults. Investing in our young people today *will* net a positive return for generations. Thank you.