

February 21, 2013

Norwalk Housing Authority (NHA), which is a current recipient of Connecticut After-School Grant Program funding, request that you do not cut this Funding Program which plays a vital role in the success of public housing youth improving literacy skills, staying in school and remaining, engaged academically through the grant we receive.

The Connecticut After-School Grant Program is this public housing authority's sole source of literacy funding support for students attending the five free after school Learning Centers located on public housing sites, easily accessible to residents. The Centers provide homework help but without this grant's funding cannot provide the instilling of a *permanent foundation and continual building of literacy skills* that the certified teachers funded through this grant provide to our minority low-income youth we serve who cannot receive these supports through a school system severely hampered by budget cuts nor from additional opportunities provided by families where the average family income is \$19,841. The population we serve consists of 57% Black and 38% Hispanic households. 88% of households are headed by females.

Our Literacy Program provides certified teachers who take on the role of a reading coach just review reading and writing. It analyzes how each youth learns best and uses techniques taught to the certified teaching staff in past years by *Yale-affiliated Literacy How* to identify problems and use various approaches to build a solid, lasting foundation of reading and writing skills by working both collectively and individually on improvement employing methodologies that focus on many skill sets including hand-eye coordination, phonics, retention and reasoning. The Program focuses on comprehension, fluency, writing, vocabulary, phonics, listening and speaking to ensure students become and remain engaged.

The Literacy Center staff and a select group of NHA students are pleased to announce the beginning of a Project Based Learning Initiative that will culminate with a presentation at the annual Connecticut After-School Spring Conference in April, 2013.

Project Based Learning is an instructional approach built upon learning tasks that engage student motivation and interest. The activities planned are designed to answer a leading, thought provoking question. Project Based Learning is all about learning in depth. The group of students will work together toward a common goal. Communication, presentation, time management, research, inquiry, leadership, and organizational skills are all utilized. Reading Coaches will serve as adult mentors that will guide, assist with planning appropriate activities that support the question and utilize the curriculum, impose appropriate inquiries, and develop multiple means of assessment and self-reflection.

Norwalk Housing Authority has received praise from educators for achievement over the first five years of 74% of students improving and a National Award of Excellence, detailed here:

- **Assessments from Fall through Spring for the past 5 years have shown that at least 74% of students improved in their reading skills each year.**
- **Impressive benchmark achievements by students led to a 2010 National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) Award of Excellence for the Literacy Program and acknowledging that this Program should serve as a model for other housing authorities.**
- **2009 impressive results of the Literacy Program led the successful award of funding from United Way to create a Math Literacy Program.**
- **Students in this program have received private school scholarships or are applying to colleges or are currently enrolled in college.**

Without this program the students we serve will fall behind their peers and will become less qualified to attend college or compete for a job upon graduation from high school. As a result, these students will put a significantly higher financial burden on State and Federal government. We fear that more students will become disengaged and school drop-out rates may rise as a result of this loss of funding. This will have devastating effects both on the individual students and the future economy of the City of Norwalk and the State since studies have shown approximately one third of high school dropouts receive social services. Statistics are clear and disturbing, drawing direct links between illiteracy and social problems, such as welfare, poor job performance, substance abuse, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, and crime. Improving literacy skills is an important first step toward improving the quality of life for many inner-city youth.

The positive impact the Literacy Program has had on public housing youth is exemplified in the story of "Elle" (a pseudonym to protect identity). Elle is a bright, lovely young girl originally from Haiti who is now applying to four-year colleges and wants to become a social worker so she can help people. Elle entered the Literacy Program in the fall of 2008 and began building groundwork of literacy skills in reading and writing in English which she desperately needed, having only been in the United States for 2 years. She stayed in the Literacy Program for 2 years during Middle School, receiving A's and B's. Sadly, Elle left the Program when her mother left her family. Elle's grades plummeted as she went through a period of grief, feeling betrayed and losing her sense of self-worth. She did not care about herself, school or her future. Finally, two years later, she came out of this depression and began to work to pull her grades up. Key to this effort was the groundwork laid by the two years of attendance in the Norwalk Housing Literacy Program which had provided her with the tools to read, write and *think* through written assignments. Elle was able to bring her grades back to the A's and B's and now will move into college.

This story is extremely important because many of our enrolled students will suffer some loss or instability that will impact their performance at school. Most common are the loss of a family member, the loss of employment by the family wage-earner, the death by violence of a friend, the intense pressures of gangs on youth. This Program is the core of

the educational curriculum offered at our five on-site free after-school Learning Centers which currently serve 230 students. It is the key to a more promising economic future.

Thus, we are asking Governor Malloy and the State Legislature not to cut the Connecticut After-School Grant Program. Cutting this Program will directly deny many of Norwalk's poorest youth the opportunity to improve their literacy skills and have a chance to break the cycle of poverty through education. Whereas, the continued investment in the Connecticut After-School Grant Program will lead to substantial government savings in social services later and enlarge our educated workforce, increasing our tax revenue base.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Curtis O Law
Executive Director

Patricia Marsden-Kish
Director, Learning Centers