

**Testimony to the Elementary & Secondary Education Sub-Committee
of the Appropriations Committee
Governor's Budget Proposal – SDE
In Support of Reinstating Funding for After School Programs
Submitted by Denise Clapsaddle, Interim Coordinator, STRIVE Program Director
February 21, 2013**

My name is Denise Clapsaddle and I am the Interim Coordinator for the STRIVE after school program of the YWCA New Britain serving seventy Middle School girls at two locations. STRIVE provides homework help and structured recreational activities that teach cooperation, communication and problem-solving skills, in addition to providing pregnancy prevention and tobacco, drug and alcohol awareness education.

Most of the girls in the program are from economically marginal families and are eligible for free school lunches. For many of them, English is either not their first language or not the first language of their parents, which makes it difficult for them to receive homework help at home, even if their parents are available to provide it.

On a typical day at STRIVE, I might find a girl rushing to complete her homework before the activity time begins, because she lives with her grandparents, parents and siblings in a crowded home where she finds it difficult to concentrate and lacks access to a computer. Another girl writes in her journal that she is lonely, and reading this, the teacher reaches out to her, helping her to make friends. Another girl has a goal of trying to learn to eat more healthy and to exercise regularly. She comes regularly and for her attendance she is awarded with a pedometer.

Yet another girl is walking around the classroom wearing an "empathy belly," a padded garment that covers the upper body with a weighted belly that helps girls experience what it looks and feels like to be seven months pregnant. "My mom is seven months pregnant right now," she says. "Try to sit down on the couch and get back up," I answer. She does so, and needs assistance from another girl. "Now you know why your mom is always reaching her hand out to be helped out of chairs," I say. "She cleans houses for a living," the girl adds. "Now you know what she is going through," I say. Lessons like these are invaluable, and can be life-changing.

Recently, when asked what she liked about the STRIVE program, one girl wrote, "We do fun activities, go on educational but also fun field trips; we get to make a lot of things like goop. Also we get to meet new people from other schools and make new friends. None of the staff are disrespectful towards us and they treat us fair and I always have a great time, learn something new, and do something different when I come."

Another girl wrote, "I like STRIVE because we have sooo much fun doing solar systems, Goop, Nail Polish Project, the project with salt and pepper (I did these two). I also liked the Industrial Museum [field trip]. I also have fun and I feel safe in STRIVE because Ms. Mary buil[t] a trust with us and we could tell her anything. I learned a lot of math and science, my grades are getting better."

I firmly believe that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In the short run it may seem fiscally responsible to cut after school programs, but in the long run we will pay more if programs like this are cut. We will pay in more teen pregnancies and fewer high school and college graduates who are able to enter our workforce. We will pay in families already stretched to the breaking point with recession-related financial difficulties who will be forced to deal with juvenile delinquency by their children who no longer have constructive activities led by positive role models to occupy their free time after school. Connecticut cannot afford the real costs of cutting after school programs. Thank you for your attention to my testimony.