

March 3, 2015

TO: Appropriations Committee
FROM: Elizabeth Morgan
Executive Director, Oddfellows Playhouse, Middletown, CT
RE: State Department of Education: Changes to Interdistrict Cooperative Grant Program

Good evening, Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Betsy Morgan. I recently retired as Director of the Middlesex Coalition for Children. I am now the Executive Director of Oddfellows Playhouse, a community school of the arts in Middletown, whose mission encompasses arts, education and -- with special emphasis -- social justice.

I want to express deep concern over the Governor's proposed changes to the Interdistrict Cooperative Grant Program – reducing funding by 50% and restricting grants to towns in the Sheff region. The reduction in funding is a very serious blow to a highly successful program, which deserves not to be cut but to be expanded. The academic enrichment programs supported by Interdistrict Cooperative funding are the locus of much that is creative, innovative and challenging in current Connecticut education. 150 terrific programs, available to students throughout the state, fire children's imaginations and shape their futures. Equally important, I believe, is that these programs, which focus on building relationships among students across racial, ethnic and income lines, are carrying the banner of our ideals – our American belief in a society of equality and justice. Public education needs this idealism. Cut Interdistrict funding and the lights will dim.

But I especially want to oppose restricting the Interdistrict Cooperative program to the Sheff region. The effort to improve student achievement in reading, writing, math and science, while at the same time reducing racial isolation, is needed all over the state. While the big cities get the attention, in Middletown, where schools are nearly 50% minority and low income, almost the same percentage of 3rd graders who are minority and 3rd graders who receive free/reduced school meals score **below proficient** – that is, at basic and below basic – in reading. The challenge to improve student achievement is huge. At the same time, in Middlesex County minority and low income families are concentrated in a single town, Middletown. School districts in 13 of the other 14 county towns have negligible minority percentages, under 10%. Like the Sheff region, we need creative intervention to raise achievement and build an inclusive society. Note that Middlesex County has no magnet or charter schools. Restricting Interdistrict Cooperative Program grants to the Sheff region would be to neglect children in other areas of the state.

My organization participated in the Interdistrict Cooperative Grant program for 16 years, offering arts and language programs that brought together thousands of children -- about 12,000 children total – from all county towns and all backgrounds. The combination of high educational quality and intentional inclusiveness made the Playhouse's programs– along with other local Interdistrict Cooperative programs -- beacons of hope in Middlesex County. They enjoyed county-wide interest and support.

I respectfully urge the Appropriations Committee to pass a budget that restores funding for the Interdistrict Cooperative program and continues to make it available to students state-wide.