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My name is Orianna Baez, and I am the Director of the A.I.M. Afterschool & Summer Program in Bellows Falls. For the last nine years, A.I.M. has been an instrumental tool in helping students learn new skills and achieve success beyond the traditional school hours. Since its inception in 2008, A.I.M. (which stands for Achieve, Inspire, Motivate) continues to provide a caring and learning environment where students can pursue new goals, and find the motivation to succeed in their academic and personal life. With close ties to the community, A.I.M. has become a visible and important part in the daily lives of students at Bellows Falls Middle School. Our programs are designed with the developmental and social needs of middle schoolers, and range from academic support activities like math tutoring, to enrichment electives like robotics, student newspaper and bike repair workshop.

Summer learning is a vital element to our program model and allows participants to thrive and learn in a supportive environment. During the summer, youth are able engage in meaningful experiences that connect them to the world around them. One parent shared that, *“summer camp exceeded both mine and my child's expectations. I expected that she would be safe, but I didn't expect her to learn so much and be this excited about it.”*

But most importantly, A.I.M. is more than a program; it is more than our place. For many of our students and working families, A.I.M. is their *only* option. At the moment, there are no other programs in Bellows Falls that provide these unique and high-quality opportunities to middle school aged youth between the hours of 3:00 and 5:00 PM which, according to research, are the peak hours for youth to commit crimes, be in or cause an automobile accident, be victims of crimes, smoke, drink alcohol or use drugs. At A.I.M., we are continuously serving the most vulnerable and at-risk population, while also committing to the notion that EVERY child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential.

This why now, more than ever, we NEED Vermont to support statewide access to high quality afterschool and summer learning for all children, youth, and families because or many programs like A.I.M., maintaining sustainability is crucial. While we receive partial funding through a federal 21st Century Community Learning Center Grant, a significant amount also comes from our local school budget - with increased concerns of level funding and cuts, there is always a deep rooted fear that we might be next on the chopping block. At a time when our schools' resources are exceedingly limited, afterschool and summer programs are a cost-effective way to supplement the school day by supporting students and working families. This is why it is essential that our great state provides greater investments in afterschool and summer programs.

The work that we do in afterschool matters and most importantly, and it makes a difference in the lives of the children we serve. Thank you for letting us shine a light on our afterschool and summer learning today!