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Good morning Chairwoman Webb, Vice-Chair Cupoli, and members of the House Committee on Education. I am Orianna Baez and for the last nine years, I've been the Program Director of A.I.M. Afterschool in Bellows Falls. This morning, I'd like to paint a picture of our small but mighty community and the impact an afterschool program can have. The village of Bellows Falls is nestled in the Connecticut River Valley of southern Vermont, and, if you drive too fast, you may miss it as you make your way between the larger towns of Springfield and Brattleboro. Bellows Falls is rich with history and pride but the last few years have been challenging. The opioid epidemic, lack of affordable housing and underemployment has created a significant ripple among our families. Just recently, our school district experienced a 13% increase in families experiencing homelessness from last year, with a total of 55 homeless children in Windham Northeast overall.

However, despite the adversities facing the families and children in our community, one thing remains constant: afterschool is an essential tool for growth and success.

- A.I.M. is accessible to all students at Bellows Falls Middle School. With an emphasis on social emotional learning, personal growth, STEM, and youth voice, every student has a chance to explore their individual interests and connect their learning experiences to the school day. Many of our programs have embedded transferable skills that tie into the school's academic goals, and students actively reflect on their outcomes within the lens of their Personalized Learning Plans (PLP).
- As part of our STEM/Career Development initiative, A.I.M. partners with the River Valley Tech Center in Springfield to provide exploratory opportunities for students after school. With a range of tech/career activities, participants can explore various trades and fields such as welding, human services, sound engineering, horticulture, and culinary arts.
- The STEM Pathways Program, has created unique opportunities for high school teens to engage in workforce development skills, STEM quality instruction strategies, and career exploration of teaching and engineering by being trained to lead STEM engineering lessons with 5th and 6th grade students in A.I.M. This year, our teen instructors have helped design their own STEM/engineering program

(Robotics, Video Game Design, Bridge Builders) with two of them using the as part of their senior year capstone project.

- Summer learning is a vital element to our program model and allows participants to thrive and learn in a supportive environment. During 5 weeks of the summer, youth are able to engage in meaningful experiences that connect them to the world around them. The summer also offers leadership opportunities for 8th graders transitioning to high school and employs 2 high school teens each year.

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. The local Boys and Girls Club closed down a few years ago due to lack of funding, and the YMCA only offers services to elementary school children. Therefore, for many families at Bellows Falls Middle School, A.I.M. is the *only* option.

Programs like A.I.M. are vital in communities across Vermont. While we receive partial funding through a federal 21st Century Community Learning Center Grant, a significant amount also comes from our local school budget and private grants - 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. Governor Scott's proposal for universal afterschool is a monumental first step in expanding programming state-wide. Now is the perfect time to fund this initiative.

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!