

The following testimony is given by Thomas O'Connor to The Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations.

Hello, my name is Thomas O'Connor of Jeffersonville. Thank you for your time and allowing me to speak in support of the appropriation request in the Youth Council Bill and the continued financial support of after school programs of this great state.

Our after school programs are a critical component in the education of our youth. Our communities grow and prosper thanks to the strong collaboration between our after school spaces and leaders with our educational instructors and administrators.

Since the pandemic struck, Vermont made every conscious effort to prioritize the needs of our most vulnerable, our youth. When our schools re-opened their doors it was clear that the after school space was going to become even more valuable in keeping our youth safe and involved in fulfilling enrichment opportunities.

I proudly work with a team that provides academic enrichment to the community of Lamoille North. We saw how powerful opening our doors was to our families. We were able to help our youth process their social and emotional feelings about the changes in their lives, we were able to provide food and nutrition to all of our families, and most importantly we provided new and robust learning opportunities to enrich their education.

Our programs help bolster the knowledge gained during the school day, while also helping our youth learn self-advocacy skills. We give youth a voice and a chance to speak up for their desires in education. After school professionals can help with personalized learning plans and the development of educational goals, even in our youngest learners. A strong democracy is built on all citizens having a voice that is heard and understood. The voice of our youth will not only assist in the direction education needs to go, but will also identify the needs of learners for years to come. As a society we must remember that the youth voices of today, become the leadership voices of tomorrow.

Again Vermont is ranked in the top 10 nationally for its after school programs. These programs do more than just provide a safe space for our youth. These spaces provide additional opportunities to learn about oneself, create stronger communities, and to enhance the education of the leaders of the future.

In closing I ask that the State of Vermont continue to provide financial assistance to our after school programs and I ask that all of you support the Youth Council Bill to give our Vermont youth the voice they deserve.

Thank you.

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