

**Testimony of LaDonna Gamble**  
**Before the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families**  
**March 11, 2008**

Good morning. My name's LaDonna Gamble, and I'm the Interim Project Director of the Bridges to the Future Before and Afterschool Program's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers in Flint, Michigan.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. This is a first for me, but it's a lot easier because my Congressman, Representative Kildee is here today. It's good to see you, sir. Thank you for your support for afterschool programs. It means so very much.

I bring today the perspective of someone who has seen afterschool work its miracles from several vantage points. I've experienced it as a child growing up in Flint, the birthplace of community education. I've worked as a front line staffer and administrator at an afterschool site, working with children. And now I administer Flint's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers programs. I see what a difference afterschool makes in the lives of our children and their families. I know how crucial it is.

So I'm here today to respond, as a voice from the field, to the President's proposal to revamp the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers initiative into a voucher program, as well as to his proposed budget cut for afterschool. I think both are very bad ideas that would have a disastrous effect on afterschool programs in Flint, across Michigan, and around the nation.

More than that, I think they're bad ideas that distract us from doing what we need to do for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) initiative, which is to increase funding to get it closer to the level authorized under the *No Child Left Behind Act* -- \$2.5 billion.

Let me start by telling you about our program in Flint. The Bridges to the Future program spans all of Genesee County, serving more than 17,000 children, from kindergarten through 9<sup>th</sup> grade. County-wide, Bridges has 109 sites. I oversee the Bridges program in Flint, which includes programs in 32 elementary schools and five middle schools. On any given day, about 4,000 children attend Bridges programs in Flint. Total enrollment is larger, but for various reasons (illness, family matters, student choice, etc), perfect attendance is rare.

We have two separate 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers grants in Flint, one that supports five of our seven middle school programs, and a second grant that funds five of our elementary programs. We're also very fortunate to have the support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, based in Flint, which, as you know, is a major supporter of afterschool. They give a very significant grant to our community partner, the United Way of Genesee County, which in turn supports the Bridges program in Flint and county-wide.

Let me tell you what that funding supports. There are two basic components to our daily program. First, students receive academic support, or what we call "mind time." And second is broad program of enrichment activities.

“Mind time” includes lessons reinforcing what students are learning during the regular school day, as well as group and individual help with homework. Mind Time can also include activities such as chess, which some studies have shown builds students’ math skills. We coordinate with our school day staff to make sure we’re on track with their curriculum, and to try to shore up any weaknesses that the teachers are seeing.

Our enrichment activities include a wide range of things, and many of them involve our various community partners. Many of our activities involve the arts, and we have an invaluable partner in the Flint Cultural Center, which provides lessons and programs for our children that introduce them to the visual arts, music, writing and more.

Our kids also get a healthy dose of science and technology. We offer a terrific Lego Lab and robotics program in middle schools, courtesy of our 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant. The kids just love it. It’s pretty popular with the adults, too, to tell the truth!

We conduct a number of activities that were once part of the regular school day, but that between tight budgets and the focus on state assessment tests, were discontinued. So we have a choir program, and we train students for the spelling bee. This coming weekend, our middle school sites will participate in a Science Olympiad Competition, competing with children from across the county and the region. They are building rockets. There will be a trebuchet competition – those are the very large catapult-type devices that were the Peacekeeper Missiles of the Middle Ages. It will be a remarkable event, so much fun for the kids that they aren’t even noticing all the engineering and science learning they are doing to prepare!

Of course, we also make sure the kids run around, and get physical activity through sports, active play and more. Our summer programs are funded by 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC, and for the past three years we have had a much needed focus on fitness and nutrition. In addition to providing our kids with a nutritious snack in the afternoon, many of them also rely on us for a healthy dinner after programming ends.

That’s a very quick sketch of what we do. Our two major funding sources are the C.S. Mott Foundation grant to the United Way of Genesee County, and our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers grants. We work to raise other funds and in-kind donations as well. We do that program-wide and also site-by-site, as individual afterschool sites engage with local businesses and community organizations. But I want to make clear that in Flint, we don’t have all that many options. It’s not 1965, and the automotive industry isn’t pouring money into our local economy anymore. We need our grants.

So on the budget cut, I feel as if we’ve had this conversation before. I think you all know that in 2003, the President proposed cutting the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC initiative back by 40 percent. The public erupted. Parents, educators, business leaders, pretty much everybody with a stake in our children’s safety and education rose as one to object. Members of Congress heard from their constituents and decided to reject the President’s unwise proposal.

Now it's back. The numbers are different, and it's got the additional bad idea of a voucher program attached to it, but it's still a very large, and entirely unjustified, budget cut.

The President's proposal is at odds with any number of independent, scientific evaluations of afterschool programs. One very recent study that you might have heard of is the "Study of Promising Afterschool Programs," by scholars Deborah Lowe Vandell and Kim Pierce of the University of California at Irvine, and Elizabeth Reisner of Policy Studies Associates. It showed that regular participation in high quality programs led to significant gains in test scores and work habits.

And believe me, that's just one of many, many studies that demonstrate with hard numbers what I would guess is also intuitive for all of us. If we spend time with kids, helping them with their studies, giving them incentive to come to school, engaging them in relationships with caring adults, making sure they're safe in the afternoons, exposing them to new, horizon-expanding activities, getting them off the couch and onto the playing field ... if we do all those things, good things happen for our kids. One of those good things is that they do better in school. And a number of studies show other positive impacts, including improved behavior, better fitness and less obesity, and less stress on working parents – which makes them better employees, and probably better parents!

So it's not by accident that you hear over and over again from parents and educators that afterschool works. It keeps kids safe, it inspires students to learn, and it helps working families. We say it because it's what we see happening every day.

A recent third-party evaluation of the Bridges to the Future program found that more than 90 percent of parents with kids in the program say their children do better in school and learn new things as a result of the program. They also overwhelmingly felt that their children were safer in Bridges. So while we're always focused on improving what we do, we know what we're doing is working.

Now, in Michigan, estimates are that the state would lose about \$8 million in grant monies from this plan, down from its current funding of \$37 million. On the ground, that'd mean that more than 8,000 children would lose afterschool across the state. Nationwide, the estimate is that more than a quarter million children would lose afterschool. In Flint, we already have waiting lists of children wanting to be in our afterschool programs. A cut would only exacerbate the problem.

I should also point out that in Michigan, there are many more grant applications submitted than can be funded by the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC initiative. Between 2004 and 2006, the state could fund only 21 percent of the proposals it received. That's a lot of unmet demand for afterschool, and cutting the budget would make matters worse. I can't imagine that Michigan is unique in that respect. For example, from data gathered by the Afterschool Alliance, we know that the parents of at least 15 million children say they'd enroll their kids in an afterschool program if one were available to them.

Now, what would this cut mean for the children of Flint, Michigan? It would depend, of course, on how Michigan decides to implement it, but it could be a disaster. The proposed cut, if enacted by Congress, would almost certainly mean that Michigan would make no new grants next year. So while a fifth or more of the state's grants would expire, no new grants or renewals would go out to replace them. Quite simply, that'd mean fewer afterschool programs, fewer children safe, and fewer families served.

The state might also elect to implement an across-the-board cutback, or perhaps a cutback for some of the grantees – those in their final year of multi-year grants, for example. That would hit us hard, because our elementary school 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant enters its final year this June. So conceivably, we could start the 2008-09 school year, and then lose funding mid-stream. That'd be a disaster.

Our summer program for kids would also suffer, perhaps have to fold. It's entirely dependent on our 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant.

None of those are good outcomes, and all of them cry out for rejecting this proposal.

I want you to know that I'm very proud of the work we do at Bridges to the Future. I'm proud that our community has recognized the importance of afterschool in the lives of children and families. I'm proud of the work we've done to create a vibrant afterschool program. I'm proud of all the afterschool professionals who give their hearts, their brains, their energy, and their perseverance to afterschool every day. And I'm especially proud of our kids for taking part in programs that mix fun with learning, and meeting the adults more than half way. It's a remarkable thing to see it all come together.

And we're very grateful to the federal government and, particularly to Members of Congress, for what you've done to make it possible. Without the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC initiative, it's hard to imagine that afterschool would have grown as much as it has over the last 10 years. Your support of afterschool funding has created opportunities for millions of children across the nation. So I thank you on behalf of those kids and their families.

But also on their behalf, I urge you to reject this unwise proposal. And more than that, I urge you to make good on the letter and intent of the *No Child Left Behind Act* where it concerns afterschool. It mapped out a series of modest but steady increases in afterschool funding through Fiscal Year 2007, none of which came to pass. For 2008, you found funds for a modest increase, and believe me, parents and families noticed and appreciated it. That was a terrific down-payment on the expansion that is so critical to increasing and improving afterschool opportunities from coast to coast.

So I ask you to stay on that path, by increasing funding this year as well. I know you have competing priorities. But afterschool pays such incredible dividends today and in the future, that I hope you'll find space in the budget to increase funding.

And I ask you to remember that converting 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers to a voucher program would completely undermine what we're doing. It'd make funding precarious,

because we wouldn't know from semester to semester, maybe even month to month, what our funding base would be. We're already struggling with uncertainty about funding. A voucher plan would only make it worse.

Also, I'm not sure what it would accomplish. I presume the Administration wants to involve more community organizations in afterschool. But those organizations, including faith-based organizations, are already partners in afterschool programs across the nation.

Another problem it would create has to do with sustained participation by children. Studies tell us that for afterschool to have its best impact, sustained and regular attendance is key. I worry that a voucher approach would work against that because it would encourage children and families to drop in and out of programs, taking funding with them.

In short, I think the voucher proposal is trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist. And in fact, I think it would create problems by destabilizing funding for existing programs, and undermining existing community partnerships.

One other point I'd like to make very quickly on the voucher aspect of the proposal is that it would make it exponentially more difficult to get new afterschool programs off the ground. One of the very best ways to launch a program is with a 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant. It gives programs a multi-year funding base from the first day of the grant. There are other funding sources, of course, but not everywhere and they're hard to come by. They're especially hard to come by in Flint. And they're incredibly scarce in rural communities. And of course, those difficult economic realities also make afterschool all the more important to the community. So I think that taking away the stability of the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant would drain much of the energy out of the afterschool movement. It's already incredibly difficult to get an afterschool program off the ground. The President's proposal would make it that much harder.

Along those same lines, we use our 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC grant to leverage other funding sources. Conversion to a voucher program would take that away from us, and hurt us in our pursuit of additional support. It would also be nearly impossible to devise a sustainability plan for afterschool programs, without knowing what kind of revenue to expect from voucher students.

So both in terms of the cut, and in terms of the conversion to a voucher program, it's important that the President's proposal be defeated. But it's also important that defeating it not distract us from the important work of expanding afterschool opportunities for children and families across the nation.

Thank you very much.