

The Simpson Street Free Press

An Education Program and Community Newspaper for Dane County Teens



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Dear Commission Members:

We are writing to address an unusual issue. Two years ago, during the community services process, Simpson Street Free Press (SSFP) programs suffered dramatic reductions. It's clear now this was not the commission's intent. It appears we mistakenly asked for less funding than we should have. Our intention was to request the same amount of support previously designated for SSFP programs. Again, we intended to request the same amount – no more, no less. Apparently, we asked for less.

Several factors contributed to this misunderstanding. The first is the unusual nature of our organization. SSFP is a different kind of non-profit model. We operate with very limited paid staff and have never had a development department. Resources go directly to kids and programs. Our programs are innovative and very effective, and we consistently achieve solid results. But, sometimes this unusual organizational model can put us at a disadvantage. During the city process two years ago, our volunteer teachers were attempting to navigate a much changed city process. We did attend orientation meetings, and we did the best we could. But it was not our intention to request a 40% funding reduction.

Another factor is this misunderstanding relates to the revised process itself. Separating middle school programs from high school programs was difficult for us. As you know, one of the central components of the SSFP model is our across age-group approach. We invest in kids, expecting that they will move up through the professional ranks of our newsroom. This is much like any small publication or other small business. Older students assist younger students as a matter of course. For instance, in the realm of homework help and achieving good grades, we use what is called a School Support System or "SSS." Having trouble grasping a math concept? There's always someone in our newsroom who took that course last year. And it's part of their job description to help you. Another example is what we call "Pipeline Staffing." This concept is part of everything we do. Our paid employees are former SSFP students who are now in college. These college students are mentors and role models for our high school-age student editors. In turn, our high school students mentor and assist our middle school reporters. We don't seek funding for any of this; concepts like these are simply embedded in our curriculum. It's all just part of our formula, part of an overall effective approach to after-school learning. It's how we develop young leaders. It's why we are so successful getting kids to buy into rigorous academics. National research strongly suggests such methods work. Separating programs by age group makes it more difficult to adequately explain some of our key program elements. We're not complaining or asking you to change an entire process. We do ask you to consider that a small (but innovative) agency with limited staff found it difficult to navigate through a changed process, and apparently managed to request less funding.

This conundrum created another unintended consequence. Nine years ago we were asked by community services staff to step in and create an academic component for the summer Safe Haven program at Glendale School. We agreed. Every summer since that time SSFP has offered writing and academic skills workshops for students in grades 3-6. These workshops take place in the

afternoons at Glendale and other sites. Because workshops are held in the summer, when high school and college students are anxious for hours and available to work, we successfully replicated many of the best SSFP strategies. Older students gain valuable skills, acquire summer employment and build strong resumes by managing a newsroom and assisting younger students. Research shows that academic skills often slide during the summer, in particular for lower income kids and second language learners. But kids of all ages flock to SSFP newsrooms every summer. They love the idea of working for SSFP, becoming “real” reporters. Each September they publish a special Back-to-School issue of SSFP that is distributed in local schools and throughout the city. Unfortunately, this winning formula also slipped between the cracks two years ago. We assumed the workshops wouldn’t be cut, after all community services asked us to launch the program and it is an unmitigated success. But, it didn’t seem to fit. So we tried, apparently unsuccessfully, to roll it into our overall proposal. In large measure, these are the circumstances that caused us to request less.

[The popularity, success, and tradition of the Glendale workshops compelled us to continue the program, placing a significant financial burden on our small organization.]

We respectfully request that the commission do what it can to correct this unfortunate mistake, even though the mistake was largely our own. In this year’s proposal we have requested the level of support previously afforded to SSFP. This level of funding will allow us to continue the Glendale summer program. We will also continue all other SSFP programs, a richly layered menu of interconnected academic programs for youth of all ages and from all over Madison. And it will allow us to continue our efforts to expand SSFP curriculum and lesson plans to other after-school sites in Madison, a concept we presented to commission members earlier this year. This innovative concept is drawing much interest around the city.

And, as with all SSFP programs, it presents a range of opportunities for collaboration between schools and various after-school and community-based sites. Again, much recent research demonstrates school-community partnerships help bridge achievement gaps. Communities across the country are looking for ways to apply these strategies and foster these partnerships. In Madison, Simpson Street Free Press has pursued this course for 20 years -- a stated goal of City of Madison and the school district. We have honed a formula that works, and we are embraced in many Madison neighborhoods where access to academic support programs is limited.

We hope that you will judge SSFP on the merits of our programs, and not on our unusual organizational model. Across the country small and medium-size non-profits often act as laboratories, creating new and innovative methods that can then be replicated and expanded. The SSFP newsroom is clearly such a case. Please consider visiting SSFP, talking with our writers, and witnessing for yourself the innovative methods constantly at work in our newsroom. We think you will be glad you did.

Thank you for considering our request, our invitation, and for the excellent work you do in our community.

Respectfully submitted,

-- The Staff and Board of Simpson Street Free Press

