

Your View: Endangered AmeriCorps teachers change lives of city's low-income girls

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By Lisa Schmid Alvord, chairwoman of the board for Our Sisters' School in New Bedford.

Last week, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives approved a budget proposal that would, among many other cuts, slash all federal funding from AmeriCorps, the flagship service organization that in less than two decades has enabled over 540,000 young Americans to strengthen their communities through volunteer initiatives in education, public safety, health care and the environment.

In short, AmeriCorps — a beckoning light to many of the neediest citizens in our country, state and city — is in danger of going dark. We cannot let this happen. AmeriCorps was founded in 1993 to challenge an entire generation to work for their country. And the generation listened. Democrats. Republicans. It didn't matter. Anyone with half a brain could see that AmeriCorps made sense — that it was an effective, efficient, low-cost way to meet several critical national challenges.

I know this firsthand because I am one of a small army of volunteers from the South Coast area — board members, tutors, mentors, morning speakers, fund raisers — serving Our Sisters' School in New Bedford (in the old Temple Tifereth Israel building, across from Buttonwood Park).

Our Sisters' School (OSS) is an independent, tuition-free middle school for girls in Grades 5 through 8 whose family income falls below the state fuel-assistance guidelines. Here is what this newspaper had to say about OSS in 2008: "If the new girls' school opening in New Bedford this Fall succeeds half as well as the school that inspired it — the all-boys Nativity Prep — 60 disadvantaged girls from the New Bedford area will be changed forever."

To pursue this dream, OSS raises all its own funds — benefiting from the individual and matching gifts of concerned local citizens, and from generous foundation grants — and relies on AmeriCorps volunteers for its primary teaching staff. These volunteers have accomplished miracles.

To cite just one example: During the 2009/2010 school year, all OSS grades increased their average math scores by almost three grade levels, and their average reading scores by just under two grade levels. In one year!

Without its AmeriCorps volunteers — who work long hours in return for living quarters, a food allowance and a modest monthly stipend — the future of Our Sisters' School would be severely threatened. It is as simple as that. And all the hope that has blossomed over the last three years — in the hearts of these deserving girls, in the hopes of their hard-pressed families, in the aspirations of the entire Greater New Bedford area — would come under a dark cloud as well.

This penny-wise-and-pound foolish proposal must be stopped. Solving our nation's deficit problem is undeniably important. But surely there are other areas to target — areas infinitely more costly to the federal government, involved with tasks of lesser importance to the future of our country — that should be looked at long before the government's axe falls on AmeriCorps. President Obama made this very point in a speech last Saturday: "Cutting investments in education would limit our ability to outcompete the rest of the world". We all need to be willing to sacrifice, but we can't sacrifice our future."

Fifty years ago another pPresident, also worried about the future, challenged our nation to rise above itself: "Ask not what your country can do for you," the young JFK called out. "Ask what you can do for your country!" Today's AmeriCorps volunteers have clearly understood the Kennedy challenge. They have asked his question. They have been given their answer. And today, all across the nation, they are doing the job. Let's not pull the plug on them now!

I ask all concerned citizens of Greater New Bedford to help protect the efforts of these dedicated volunteers — to keep this light shining! — by contacting Sens. John Kerry and Scott Brown.