



Hannah Vahl | The Middletown Press
Ava Hart, center, speaks about the benefits of the Parent Leadership Training Institute at a press conference Wednesday on the first floor of the Main Street Market while state Sen. Thomas Gaffey, D-13, listens, far right.

Leadership program at risk

By HANNAH VAHL
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MIDDLETOWN — Before Ava Hart attended the Parent Leadership Training Institute, she was a child care provider who people said could do better for herself. “You’re bigger than that,” she recalled one woman saying to her.

Then Donna Marino, the Middletown school district partnership coordinator, asked if she would enroll in PLTI. Though Hart initially balked at the time commitment — the program, which teaches advocacy skills, is a four-hour class once a week for 20 weeks — Marino’s persistence made her give in.

During the program, which requires that a community service project be completed, Hart started a successful family fall-out show at Wesley Elementary School so children would have something to do over Christmas break (Hart danced on stage with her children for the show).

The program ended up being replicated at three different schools in the district.

After graduating from the program in 2002, she was inspired to go back to school, getting an undergraduate degree in human services and is now expects to receive a master’s degree in social work in May. Hart, 37, of Middletown, now works as a co-facilitator for the Nurturing Parent program at Middlesex Hospital, a job she learned about through Marino.

“It’s one of the best things I’ve ever done,” she said about enrolling in the Parent Leadership Training Institute.

Parent programs such as the Parent Leadership Training Institute have been in existence in the state for 20 years, and Middle-

Governor Rell’s proposed budget cuts may affect city parents

town has been hosting it since 2000, with an alumni network of about 200 people and 15 candidates ready to start in January.

Keisha Williams, site coordinator for Middlesex County’s Parent Leadership Training Institute and a graduate of the program, says the course attracts students from the formerly homeless to housewives and teaches them how to enter the civic arena and affect change.

She said the program helps empower parents who “never thought they were supposed to be around the table.”

But the program relies on some funding from the state through the Parent Trust — money which may be pulled to help solve the state’s budget problems. Under a deficit mitigation plan that Gov. M. Jodi

Rell has proposed, the \$500,000 put in the Parent Trust this year may be yanked to help close a \$337 million current year budget shortfall. Rell is convening lawmakers into special session Dec. 15 to consider her plan.

On Wednesday Hart, along with state legislators, Middletown school district staff, and other advocates of the parent programs, gathered at Main Street Market in a show of force to ask that the cut not be made.

State Sen. Thomas Gaffey, D-13, said making the cuts would be akin to “cutting off your nose to spite your face,” and pointed out that a General Assembly colleague, state Rep. Catherine Abercrombie, a Democrat, was a graduate of PLTI.

“We acknowledge that we

are in very difficult times. We acknowledge we have to make cuts... (This) is an example of cuts that are not appropriate,” said state Sen. Paul Doyle, D-9, who promised he would work to restore money to the fund.

The Liberty Bank Foundation has supported the Parent Leadership Training Institute since 2001, donating over \$40,000 to Middletown’s program. Liberty Bank Foundation Executive Director Sue Murphy said the foundation supports PLTI because it “reaps so many rewards.”

“We’re bankers,” Murphy later added. “We are looking to invest and get a good return. And this has been a good investment.”

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