To Whom It May Concern:

In 2011, I challenged our talented Memphis arts organizations to develop new programming that would both activate positive social change and achieve academic improvement in our high schools.

Tennessee Shakespeare Company, the artistically creative and groundbreaking classical theatre troupe that makes Memphis its home, accepted this challenge and continues to make an extraordinary difference in the lives of teenagers in our Shelby County Schools system, one Freshman class at a time, with its innovative Romeo and Juliet Project.

Within the safety of this 400-year-old play, students are experiencing life-threatening situations and then "rehearsing" the positive actions necessary for their potentially life-saving outcomes.

I have been committed to reducing and stopping teen violence in Memphis with programs and partnerships that result in measurable outcomes. Tennessee Shakespeare Company provides a unique way into the issue by standing our young people on their feet, arming them with the greatest poetry in the English language, and then encouraging the students to articulate for themselves how learning the turning points in the play are critical to the re-writing of their lives.

Academically, after Tennessee Shakespeare actor-teachers have been in-classrooms teaching and acting the play, Memphis area educators say interest in literature increases and grades often rise. More than this, The Romeo and Juliet Project is proving to be an inviting first exposure to Shakespeare and the classics, which lend students soul-enriching human context and community for their future life experiences.

Tennessee Shakespeare Company and I want The Romeo and Juliet Project to be in every single ninth-grade class in the school system, free of charge to the students. I hope you will please consider helping us make this desire a reality by supporting this proven, innovative approach to engaging students in practicing and promoting non-violence.

Sincerely

Mayor A C Wharton, Jr.