

# LILLIAN R. NICHOLSON S.T.E.M. ACADEMY

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February 6, 2026

The Honorable David A. Fink  
Administrator  
Federal Railroad Administration  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE  
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Administrator Fink:

The Nicholson STEM Academy fully supports the Illinois Department of Transportation's (IDOT) application, on behalf of the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) Program, for funding through the National Railroad Partnership Program. The CREATE Program is the largest public-private partnership of its kind, involving the nation's rail industry and all levels of government.

Federal funding will advance CREATE's Rock Island Connection project (P2), the next phase of the larger 75 th Street Corridor Improvement Project, which will construct a flyover bridge to eliminate a major chokepoint and reduce conflicts between freight and passenger trains. P2 directly aligns with the goals of the National Railroad Partnership Program by improving reliability, travel times, and safety for both passenger and freight trains in the country's most congested rail terminal. P2 is necessary to fully realize the delay reductions for freight rail users at Belt Junction once passenger trains are separated from freight traffic.

A key benefit of the project is to reduce conflicts between freight and passenger trains in the corridor, which use the same tracks at the Belt Junction. Freight operators run 90 trains through the corridor daily, Amtrak runs 3 weekly Cardinal trains (serving 96,679 riders in [fiscal year] 2025), and Metra currently runs 30 SWS trains daily through the corridor (serving 976,376 riders in 2024). Because passenger trains are prioritized, freight trains are curtailed at least twice daily on the corridor, during peak morning and afternoon commuting periods (totaling six hours daily) and occasionally during non-peak periods. Rerouting Metra SWS using the P2 bridge will improve freight flows through Belt Junction, particularly to and from the adjacent NS Landers Intermodal Yard (which reported 382,329 annual lifts in 2023).

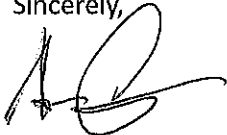
The P2 project is also critical to improving passenger rail performance across the Chicago terminal and the Midwest. Chicago's Union Station (CUS) is the National Network's busiest station, home to 17 intercity lines and serving more than 3 million customers annually. P2 will greatly improve the reliability of passenger rail service at CUS by allowing Metra to direct 30 daily trains away from CUS to the LaSalle Street Station. This change strengthens Amtrak's ability to provide reliable service with improved travel times and reduced freight conflicts for intercity rail service across the Midwest, including the Cardinal route, which connects New York Penn Station and Chicago Union Station via major destinations such as

Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Charlottesville, Cincinnati, and Indianapolis.

The P2 project advances the CREATE Program's overarching goals—increasing the efficiency, capacity, safety, and reliability of passenger and freight rail throughout Chicago and the nation. Chicago is the nation's premier freight hub, handling nearly half of all intermodal containers and one-third of U.S. carload freight. This investment is not merely an infrastructure upgrade – it is pivotal step toward enhancing supply chain resilience and driving economic growth nationwide.

Nicholson STEM Academy fully supports this application and looks forward to the successful implementation of the P2 project with your award of the National Railroad Partnership Program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Carson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Carson  
Principal