

Testimony to the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly
Wednesday February 11, 2009

My name is Oliver Barton and I am the director and founder of Common Ground High School, a charter school in New Haven, Connecticut. Thank you for hearing testimony today.

I'm here with fourteen very hardworking and successful students. They attend school from 8am to 3pm every day, and hour longer than most area schools, and most of them stay after for additional academic work from 3-4pm several days a week. I've been teaching a math problem solving workshop after school in the last few weeks. If there's a snow day that interrupts some of that extra academic work, they don't have to ask what happens. They know they'll stay after for extra work the next day. As a result of their great efforts, Common Ground students have shown remarkable academic progress. Their CAPT scores doubled in all four categories last year.

These students understand fiscal crisis and the resulting "austerity mode". The heat is already turned down, we're reusing the back side of copy paper, funds for student events must be raised quarter by quarter through fundraising activities, there are no extras.

But facing the possibility of having teachers laid off and increasing class size—they don't understand why that would have to happen. Taking away extra academic help after school—they don't understand why that should happen. Sharing text books with other classes so they can't study at home—they don't understand why that should happen.

The reason for each of these—teacher layoffs, lack of extra academic help, inadequate texts—is because the current budget proposal cuts charter school funding. It does not provide the seats needed for students moving up a grade in several schools, including some Common Ground students. It proposes a three-year flat-line in the per pupil expenditure rate and there are some expenses that inevitably go up some—heat, electricity, and instructional supplies. In the restructuring of the ECS formula, or through legislative action any other year, legislators had the opportunity to tie the charter school per pupil rate to the state average expenditure at public schools. Instead, the rate gets set every year. If we didn't complain every year, we'd still be at the original \$ 6,000 per pupil, less than half of what districts across the state spend on high school instruction every year. I've been doing this for ten years. But in the words of Arlo Guthrie—"I'm not tired. I'm not proud". Until the per pupil rate is tied to the state average, we'll be back every year.

Why? Because more than any other students in the state, these students are the students of the Connecticut General Assembly. Their school is funded, by law, directly by you. They work hard. They've doubled their CAPT scores. They are your students. You should be proud of them. They don't deserve to be funded at three thousand less per student than other public high schools. It is just not right.

With that in mind, we have the audacity to stand here and say that we can't provide this education at the current per pupil rate for two more years. We need the charter funding restored to the requested amount in order to provide for students moving up a grade and a five percent per pupil increase (still way below the state average) to keep the lights on and the copier running. Thank you for your consideration in this most difficult of budget years.

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