

Testimony of Anne Olcott
Parent at Common Ground High School,
358 Springside Avenue, New Haven, CT 06515
Testimony submitted to the Appropriations Committee
March 24th, 2011

Honorable Chairs, Members of the Appropriation Committee:

My son James Beech is in his junior year at Common Ground High School. He is an academically talented young man and many of our friends and neighbors and even the guidance staff at his K-8 public school questioned his decision to attend Common Ground instead of a more traditional high school. His response to them was and continues to be "Why would I want to go where everyone else is going?"

The decision to take the path less traveled has been amazingly good for him. At Common Ground he has been challenged academically by an AP Civics course in his freshman year, an AP Environmental Science course in his sophomore year, and an AP European History course this year. He has been stimulated intellectually by interdisciplinary classes like "Food and the Environment". He is participating in an independent study environmental honors project to explore more local sources for Common Ground's food.

He has participated in a variety of afterschool activities (only a few of the many offered) such as adventure club, drama club, dungeons and dragons club, environmental leaders club and science club. This winter he had the chance to travel to New Hampshire with a small group of students and staff and try snowshoeing for the first time.

He has been mentored supportively and creatively by his official advisors (who really know him because guidance groups meet twice weekly and work together in class and in community service projects) and by the faculty as a whole. He has teachers who make him work harder than he has ever worked before. He has teachers who recognize his strengths and help him share them with others. He has teachers who have become true friends.

There is no doubt that Common Ground has changed his life in variety of ways. Most prominently, it has given him a passion for the theater. Last spring he took the block class "Drama" which is co-taught by the Common Ground faculty and members of the Elm Shakespeare Company as artists in

residence. He acted as Benvolio in "Romeo and Juliet". He wrote a "deleted scene" for the play to explain why Benvolio disappears halfway through the play. This scene was staged by the drama club in the fall as a fundraiser. Now he is serving as a TA for this spring's drama class. As a result of this exposure to and immersion in Shakespeare, he applied for a summer internship with the Elm Shakespeare Company and we found out just in time for me to write this letter that he was one of three acting interns accepted. How exciting!

Common Ground is unique among schools in the public education system because it is interested in doing more than simply boosting students' test scores (although it has done that quite well).

Common Ground does more than engage students as rote learners or competent test-takers. Common Ground teachers and staff don't settle for complacency. Every member of the Common Ground community is expected to grow and learn and change and do their best. Questions are welcome and answers are sought together. Problems are solved together.

{I'm telling the story of my child at Common Ground. But I could tell the story of someone else I know who goes to Common Ground. Someone for whom school is difficult **and** home is difficult. Common Ground is helping him to be the best he can be also...even when that help is needed at 10pm on a Wednesday night.}

Since my son was born, I have hoped that he would grow up to be a person who was happy, healthy, and wise and that he would do what he could to make his corner of the world a better place.

Common Ground is helping to make my dream for my child's future come true. It is also giving him dreams of his own and the chance to attain them.

Sincerely,

Anne Olcott
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