

Testimony of Larry Dome
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358 Springside Avenue, New Haven, CT 06515
Testimony submitted to the Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2012

Honorable Chairs, Members of the Appropriation Committee:

I am writing you in support of Governor Malloy's recent education proposals, particularly regarding how schools are funded in the state of Connecticut. I have been teaching at Common Ground High School for 4 years and prior to that I was a volunteer teaching aide for a year. It has been my experience and it is my belief that this school is providing a unique and very important opportunity for its students in the greater New Haven area and providing a model for education in the state.

Since I began teaching at Common Ground, I have been painfully aware of how short of funds the school is, yet each year we have managed to raise the bar of our students academically. When I first came to Common Ground (my volunteer year) the school was on the NCLB list, but by my second year as a full time teacher the school had worked its way off the list. During that second year we also received a 5 year renewal of our charter from the state. In the ensuing years we have continued to significantly improve our CAPT scores and place a high percentage of our graduates into college.

Despite these successes we are faced with some real challenges in the very near future and without adequate funding we will struggle to provide the level of service to our students that will be required. As we begin our migration from the state standards to the Common Core Standards and as we move away from the old model of CAPT testing, we face significant challenges. Without fair funding it will be difficult to properly staff our school and provide the necessary academic programs to help our students succeed.

Our school is filled with an extremely dedicated staff. For the last four years we have had one small raise (about 1%), which really means we have been, as a staff, getting further and further behind. As painful as this has been, we have not lost staff because of the level of commitment the staff has to its students. Like all teachers, we do not have a 40 hour work week, our work continues after classes are over and when we have left school for the day and into our weekends. I worry that the staff of Common Ground will not be able to sustain this level of commitment without more compensation and relief of some duties with addition of more staff. Yet this concern is coming at a time when we will need to push even harder to keep our students performing at a high level and to ensure their success down the road.

I came to teaching after a long career in business. I initially thought of teaching at a regular public school. Trumbull had in fact invited me to student teach at the town high school, but Common Ground changed my plans. Along with my volunteer work my first year being associated with the school, I also was doing classroom observations for a methods class. It was during these observations that I fully understood why Common Ground was so different and important. I sat in on a course called Biodiversity. It is a bi-disciplinary class that combines

math and science. The core of the class is having the students learn and document all the different types of life that exist on the school's campus in West Rocks Park. Rarely have I seen students so engaged in their work and so excited about being in a class. It was a remarkable experience. Watching the class helped me understand how CGHS was helping students make a connection from the classroom to the real world. It made the science and math tangible and real for the students. Math and science were no longer just an abstract set of rules and procedures but something you really needed to understand and use to understand the world around you. It gave students the chance to use math and science to really make sense of something that they could touch. After completing the classroom observations, my mind was made up that I needed to teach at Common Ground. I was fortunate that a position was open and I have never looked back.

Common Ground is unique in the types of classes it offers and the fact that the school is part of a working farm in the city of New Haven. The school provides students with a chance to understand the role we play in our environment first hand. They can use what they are learning in classes to understand how the farm operates. They explore what sustainability means and they begin to grapple with complex problems of how we care for ourselves, our community and the environment. Students are encouraged to take this knowledge and understanding outside of CGHS and back into their communities.

CGHS takes students and provides them the chance to learn about what it means to be a productive member of a community. It prepares them not only for college, but to be life long learners who are looking for the next problem to solve. It will be almost impossible to continue this work at the level we have pushed it to without the help of the state in support of fair funding for charter schools and all schools in the state. Please support Governor Malloy and his education bill so that schools like Common Ground can continue to help our students to take the next step.

Thank you.

Lawrence Dome
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