

Testimony of Lizanne Cox
Director of Common Ground High School,
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 the director of Common Ground Charter High School, a small, college preparatory environmental studies high school located in New Haven. I was fortunate to attend Governor Malloy's Education Workshop this January, and recall feeling acutely, as Malloy unveiled his six-point reform plan and charged all attendees to take action, that I had just witnessed a transformational moment in Connecticut history. I was inspired then, and remain inspired, and am here today as an enthusiastic supporter of the Governor's budget and its provisions for charter schools to ask for your support during this year's budget process.

Common Ground was one of the first schools chartered by the state in 1987; since then, we have indeed functioned as a laboratory of educational innovation, using our unique 20-acre site located in West Rock State Park and our emphasis on active, authentic learning to push our students to high levels of academic achievement. We do good work: In 2011, our students made their fourth straight year of significant test score gains – building on the largest gains of any Connecticut high school in 2010. For the first time, these students – 70% from the City of New Haven, 80% young people of color, 60% from low-income families – are surpassing the state average in reading, math, and writing. We once again sent more than 93% of our students off to college. We are particularly excited to share that a third of our last graduating class plans to pursue an environmental field in college.

We accomplish what we are able to accomplish despite being a seriously underfunded public school. This year we are receiving \$9400 per pupil from the state of Connecticut to educate our students. Even with additional title dollars and the fundraising that we must engage in and the fact that 70% of our students reside in urban districts, our funding falls far short of the more than \$17, 0000 per pupil spent by some of those districts, such as New Haven and Bridgeport. We are a very small school--this funding inequity affects every aspect of our operation and results in constant decisions about resource allocation, decisions that I believe we should not have to make. We are proud of the array of educational opportunities we offer our children, but we know the true compromises those offerings involve. We can offer Physics or high level modern language, but there is not enough money to offer both. We were thrilled to add AP Calculus to our course roster this year and know that even more students will be taking the class next year. But Calculus books are expensive; expanding that course means that we not be able to procure badly needed science equipment. On a very real level, funding inequities impact my role as a building leader. My most important responsibility as the director of a public school is providing instructional leadership, work which I relish. Resource constraints, however, dictate very different daily roles for me, ranging from school nurse, to maintenance staff, to substitute teacher, depending on the immediate needs of the school. Even organizing students, staff, and parents

to come to Hartford for an important event such as this session detracts from my ability to provide instructional leadership.

We pride ourselves on being a small, effective operation, but scrappiness has its limits. For the first time in my 12-year history of the school, I have heard my pool of highly talented teachers, teachers who fully embrace our mission and vision, express their weariness. Common Ground has experienced very little teacher turnover—our teachers have always understood that teaching at a charter comes with some financial sacrifice. But we all feel daunted as we look at the large state mandates that loom before us. No one argues that Student Success Plans, Common Core State Standards and new Bullying and Harassment initiatives, for example, make good sense for students and deserve to be carefully implemented. My teachers, however, are tired, and they are seriously underpaid. I cannot in good conscience ask them to do more than they are doing now with given the current state of resources.

I think it is important to add, that while we are very proud of the work we are doing at Common Ground, we by no means see ourselves as better or more capable than our public school counterparts. We are extremely proud, for example, to be located in New Haven, where cutting edge school reform work is being carried out as we speak. New Haven has taken a courageous stand on teacher evaluation and is seeing real results in that investment. We also understand that the educational funding reform work being undertaken by the state government is no easy task. We are simply asking for equity—for fair funding to do the work that we do. We believe that we have earned our way; please give us a place at the table.

Thank you,

Liz Cox
Director
Common Ground High School