



COMMON GROUND

HIGH SCHOOL, URBAN FARM, AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER

Testimony from Lizanne Cox
School Director, Common Ground High School
Education Committee Public Hearing
RE: House Bill 5451
March 14, 2018

Chairperson Fleischmann, Chairperson Slossberg, Chairperson Boucher, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Liz Cox, and I am the School Director at Common Ground High School, a public charter school in New Haven, Connecticut. Each spring for more than a decade, I've stepped away from my work as a school leader to travel to Hartford to speak with you and your colleagues in the Connecticut General Assembly. I really value your hard work and dedication, and appreciate the chance to see you and talk with you each year. I wish I could be there with you in person again this morning, as I was with the Appropriations Committee in February, but cannot get away from the direct work of supporting my students, and their families and teachers, today.

I want to be frank with you today, as clear as I can be. The truth is that charter schools are chronically, systematically underfunded in Connecticut. The underfunding of charter schools is one critical piece of an education funding system that is broken. Fixing that, at the end of the day, depends on you, the members of the Connecticut General Assembly. And we are here to support you, and work alongside you, to do this hard work.

Today, we're facing a new threat, and a new consequence, of this broken approach to educational funding. House Bill 5451 would, as you know, strip \$4.7 million from funding committed to charter schools, and reallocate it to vocational and agricultural education. I offer this testimony in opposition to this bill, and to share its potential impact on our students at Common Ground.

We really value the work that our colleagues at Connecticut's vocational and agricultural education programs do. Our students work alongside students from the Sound School, planting street trees across our city. We know teachers and school leaders in these schools, and respect the good work they do for our state's students.

But taking away funding committed to current and future students at Common Ground and other charter schools, as HB 5451 would do, doesn't make sense, nor is it fair or just. Again, charter schools like Common Ground already receive significantly less public per-pupil spending than do other public schools in our city and state. And, despite long waiting lists, we haven't been able to welcome new students because seat allocations approved by the State Board of Education haven't been funded. Our teachers work incredibly hard to give our students the educational opportunities they deserve -- but, because of the funding gap between charters and other public schools, we already cannot afford to compensate our teachers fairly. Our students are working incredibly hard too -- and they need extraordinary learning opportunities to overcome barriers to success. Over the last several years, nearly 20 percent have qualified for special education supports, a number significantly above the district and state averages. Many of our students have experienced complex trauma. The majority live in low-income families. They are amazing, talented, courageous young people, and they deserve fair and adequate funding -- not a bill that would take away the opportunity to attend the school they chose, and further exacerbate the current funding inequities.

A charter is an agreement. We do everything we can to fulfill our part of the agreement.

We welcome all students, whatever strengths and challenges they bring to the table. We work hard to help every one of our students succeed. We are constantly working to improve.

We follow state regulations and accountability standards. Our teachers -- those same teachers who are chronically undercompensated -- are certified, highly qualified, career educators.

Most importantly, we are helping ALL our students grow and thrive. Our four-year graduation rates consistently exceed the state average. Our college matriculation rates -- an accountability measure that we embrace -- exceeds the state average, as well. Last year, our 9th graders' growth on reading section of the nationally normed Measures of Academic Progress exceeded 99 percent of their peers nationally. This year, as 10th graders, they made more gap-busting gains. In a year and a half, they've moved from the 8th percentile nationally to the 47th percentile nationally on language. These students needed this kind of growth -- they entered high school reading, on average, one and a half years below grade level.

We are also serious about treating New Haven Public Schools, and in public schools across the state, as our partners, colleagues and peers. We know we can learn from them, and we do everything we can to support them. This year, for instance, Common Ground staff are working with 19 different New Haven schools to help them integrate school gardens, schoolyard habitats, and outdoor classrooms into their schools. We'll welcome several thousand New Haven K-8 students to our site for school field trips, after school programs, and our immersive Nature Year program. We've build a regional network of urban public high schools that one Hartford principal called, "one of the most effective professional development opportunities I've ever experienced."

Again, we are working hard to fulfill our end of the contract. I am asking that you fulfill yours, and not let bill 5451 take away the resources committed to students at Common Ground and Connecticut's other charter schools.

Respectfully submitted,

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