

Testimony of Lizanne Cox
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Testimony submitted to the Education Committee
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Honorable Chairs, Members of the Education Committee;

I am Liz Cox, director of Common Ground, a community-based public charter high school in New Haven, CT.

We have been educating students in our community since 1997 -- one of Connecticut's first charter schools, founded by educators from New Haven public schools, growing out of a community environmental organization that was founded in 1990. Then, as now, the people who started public charter schools were committed to creating outstanding educational opportunities for all students, and developing innovative models for public education. Our founders worked incredibly hard, at funding levels and salaries far below district schools, to build a school from the ground up.

Since 1997, we have watched the charter school community grow many strong models, despite being systematically underfunded by the state, now and in the past. The schools that came on board last year in New Haven -- Elm City Montessori and Booker T. Washington -- are, like Common Ground, rooted in our community. They add to the diversity and quality of educational opportunities open to our city's students. Our community, and our kids, are better for their presence.

Over time, Common Ground has demonstrated a record of success and improvement: some of the state's largest test score gains, graduation rates significantly above the state average, college acceptance rates at or above 93%. We serve a diverse student body -- bringing together students from many towns and cities, while keeping our primary commitment to the City of New Haven. We are happy to take in the students with the greatest needs; for instance, this year, 17% of our students qualify for special education supports.

There is a real demand for the education we provide: 222 students applied for 51 spaces last year. To respond to this demand, we plan to grow from 180 students to 225 students over the next several years -- a modest rate of growth, made possible through a new building on our campus, supported by the State Department of Education and more than 300 donors, nearly all from our community.

There is also growing interest in Common Ground as a model for other schools, as well. We've chosen not to replicate, but to support like-minded schools across CT. We've worked hard and consistently to build a positive partnership with our local school district. We care about the same students they do, and respect the good work they do. Over the last three, we've helped teachers at more than a dozen schools create school gardens, schoolyard habitats, and outdoor classrooms, and integrate these resources into their curriculum. Last year, we welcomed more than 200 teachers to join in professional development workshops on our campus. We've chosen this route,

rather than becoming a CMO, as our way of fulfilling charter school's potential as laboratories for educational innovation.

At the same time, we respect that other charter schools have responded to demand by opening new schools. When families are eager for public schools that work for their kids, charters should be able to respond to this demand. Charter schools, and all public schools, should be held accountable. No one here will disagree on that. For us, an important question is whether charter schools are being held to a standards that other public schools are not.

I can say that, as a school in the middle of a renewal, that this process is rigorous and demanding. This fall, we assembled an application that was 20 pages long, supported by literally hundreds of pages of financial reports and curriculum documents. A team from the State Department of Education spent time in our classes, reviewing our finances, talking with our board, looking at the files of our special education students. Last week, about 150 parents, students, community members and staff showed up at the public hearing connected to our renewal, about 40 provided oral testimony, and nearly 100 submitted letters of support. My staff has given literally hundreds of hours to this process.

Raised bill 1096 would threaten community-based charter schools like Common Ground, and throw our ability to exist into doubt. This legislation, while unclearly written, looks like it would change the normal 5-year renewal process into something that happens annually. It would put the decision to renew charter schools in the hands of the Connecticut General Assembly, rather than the State Department of Education -- adding politics and divisiveness to a process that should be in the hands of community members and educational professionals. Perhaps most importantly, it would stop community organizations from opening any new public charter schools for the next two years -- shutting down an important opportunity for innovation and choice in our state's public school system.