

Testimony from Lizanne Cox
School Director, Common Ground High School
Appropriations Committee Public Hearing - February 13, 2020

Each spring for more than a decade, I have 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 genuinely value your hard work and dedication, and appreciate the chance to see you and talk with you each year.

I want to be frank with you today. 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.

We know that an equitable education funding formula is not going to happen today. Today, we're focused on steps we can take in the direction of fair funding, on the way to a real solution to educational funding in Connecticut. We know that the governor's budget includes a \$4 million cut to the charter school budget line. We also know that the baseline funding for charters -- \$11,250 per year -- is already below the foundation level -- the basement, bare bones level of support that Connecticut has determined it takes to educate a student. The idea that we would cut from a budget that already fails to meet the bare bones needs of public schools does not make sense to me. We know that you and the governor face hard choices each year. In the midst of these hard choices, I ask that you make a courageous one, and bring the per pupil funding for charter schools up to the foundation level of \$11,525 per student.

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. More than 20 percent of our our students qualify for special education supports, a number significantly above the district and state averages. Many of our students have experienced complex trauma. A large majority are growing up in low-income families. A growing number are English learners. They are amazing, talented, courageous young people, and they deserve fair and adequate funding.

We follow state regulations and accountability standards. Our teachers are certified, highly qualified, career educators. 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. We are committed to paying our teachers the same salaries that they would earn if they taught in our

local school district, and are right now working on a plan to close that pay gap over 3 years -- but that's simply not possible based on public funding currently available.

Most importantly, we are helping ALL our students grow and thrive. Like our teachers, our students are working incredibly hard -- and they need extraordinary learning opportunities to overcome barriers to success. 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. In each of the last two years, our 9th graders have grown more than 90% of their peers across the country in reading and math. These students need to make this kind of growth -- they entered high school reading, on average, one and a half years below grade level. These students are growing as leaders, too -- 100% of our seniors stand up and defend a portfolio that shows their growth as a powerful environmental leader before they graduate.

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 23 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 built a regional network of urban public high schools that one Hartford-area 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 continue to work to fulfill yours, and make a real step toward funding equity for public schools in Connecticut this year.

Respectfully submitted,

Lizanne Cox
School Director
Common Ground High School
358 Springside Ave.
New Haven, CT 06515
203-389-4333