

Spring 2020

Finding Common Ground: Environmental Justice Values and Academic Standards

Alexandra Weyerhaeuser
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

This project investigates how Common Ground High School, an urban charter school in New Haven, Connecticut, has implemented an environmental curriculum that serves its students and community. The school has adapted its mission and curriculum in three major phases since its founding, attempting to balance an ongoing tension between its environmental and social justice focus and the Connecticut state academic standards. Findings from interviews with administrators, teachers, and students are placed into the context of relevant literature about environmental education, the lack of diversity in environmentalism, place-based learning, culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy, and the state-mandated academic standards. While they did not explicitly root their school model or curricular development in the literature base, Common Ground's themes and values share many similarities with what experts have found. The Common Ground case study, within the context of the literature base, could serve as a guide and model for other similar programs.

Suggested Citation: Weyerhaeuser, A. (2020). *Finding Common Ground: Environmental Justice Values and Academic Standards* (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.

Spring 2020

Finding Common Ground: Environmental Justice Values and Academic Standards

Alexandra Weyerhaeuser
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

This project investigates how Common Ground High School, an urban charter school in New Haven, Connecticut, has implemented an environmental curriculum that serves its students and community. The school has adapted its mission and curriculum in three major phases since its founding, attempting to balance an ongoing tension between its environmental and social justice focus and the Connecticut state academic standards. Findings from interviews with administrators, teachers, and students are placed into the context of relevant literature about environmental education, the lack of diversity in environmentalism, place-based learning, culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy, and the state-mandated academic standards. While they did not explicitly root their school model or curricular development in the literature base, Common Ground's themes and values share many similarities with what experts have found. The Common Ground case study, within the context of the literature base, could serve as a guide and model for other similar programs.

Suggested Citation: Weyerhaeuser, A. (2020). *Finding Common Ground: Environmental Justice Values and Academic Standards* (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.

Spring 2020

Finding Common Ground: Environmental Justice Values and Academic Standards

Alexandra Weyerhaeuser
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

This project investigates how Common Ground High School, an urban charter school in New Haven, Connecticut, has implemented an environmental curriculum that serves its students and community. The school has adapted its mission and curriculum in three major phases since its founding, attempting to balance an ongoing tension between its environmental and social justice focus and the Connecticut state academic standards. Findings from interviews with administrators, teachers, and students are placed into the context of relevant literature about environmental education, the lack of diversity in environmentalism, place-based learning, culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy, and the state-mandated academic standards. While they did not explicitly root their school model or curricular development in the literature base, Common Ground's themes and values share many similarities with what experts have found. The Common Ground case study, within the context of the literature base, could serve as a guide and model for other similar programs.

Suggested Citation: Weyerhaeuser, A. (2020). *Finding Common Ground: Environmental Justice Values and Academic Standards* (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.

Finding Common Ground:
Environmental Justice Values and Academic Standards

Alexandra Weyerhaeuser
2019-2020

Advisor: Professor Carla Horwitz
Second Reader: Professor Mira Debs

Thank you to Professor Horwitz for advising this project, and to Professor Debs, Professor Zermach-Bersin, and Anne Mishkind for your guidance.

Thank you to Liz Cox, School Director of Common Ground High School, and Joel Tolman, Director of Impact and Engagement, for your help facilitating this project.

Thank you to all interview participants for your openness and willingness to participate.

Thank you to the class of 2020 Education Studies scholars for your camaraderie, peer edits and thoughtful feedback.

And thank you to my friends and family for your constant support.

Abstract	2
Introduction	2
Literature Review	8
What is Environmental Education?	9
Lack of Diversity in Environmentalism	11
Benefits of Place-Based Learning	13
Culturally-Responsive Environmental Pedagogy	15
State-Mandated Academic Standards	18
Methodology	20
Voices from Common Ground	21
Curricular History	22
Environmental and Social Justice	31
Ongoing Tension with Academic Standards	41
Constraints and Considerations	47
Conclusion	49
Appendix	50
Works Cited	66

“Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother. What befalls the earth befalls all the sons and daughters of the earth. This we know: the earth does not belong to mankind; mankind belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Mankind did not weave the web of life, but is merely a strand in it. Whatever is done to the web by us, we are doing to ourselves.”

- Chief Seattle’s speech, as read by Andy Wight, founding teacher at Common Ground.¹

This project investigates how Common Ground High School, an urban charter school in New Haven, Connecticut, has implemented an environmental curriculum that serves its students and community. The school has adapted its mission and curriculum in three major phases since its founding, attempting to balance an ongoing tension between its environmental and social justice focus and the Connecticut state academic standards. Findings from interviews with administrators, teachers, and students are placed into the context of relevant literature about environmental education, the lack of diversity in environmentalism, place-based learning, culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy, and the state-mandated academic standards. While they did not explicitly root their school model or curricular development in the literature base, Common Ground’s themes and values share many similarities with what experts have found. The Common Ground case study, within the context of the literature base, could serve as a guide and model for other similar programs.

I. Introduction

Just three miles down the road from the urban center of downtown New Haven, around the corner from busy streets, pizza joints, convenience stores, and city buses, lies a small oasis: 20 acres of park land at the base of West Rock Ridge State Park within the city of New Haven where teachers, students and community members have come together to find common ground with one another and the earth. Almost 30 years ago, a group of self-described teachers, environmentalists, concerned citizens and philanthropists created Common Ground, an environmental education charter high school in New Haven, Connecticut.² With about 41% of

¹ “From The Ground Up: Stories From the People Who Built Common Ground.” Common Ground High School, Urban Farm, and Environmental Education Center, 2 June 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=439&v=JwK1LoLqE80&feature=emb_title.

² “History.” *Common Ground*, 10 Apr. 2017, <http://commongroundct.org/about/history/>.

the 200-person student body Black or African American, 31% Hispanic or Latinx, 24% White, 58% eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and its urban setting, Common Ground differs from most “classical” environmental education programs in its philosophy, audience, and environment.³

Traditionally, the environmental field as a whole has been overwhelmingly white, upper/middle-class, able-bodied, highly-educated and male, focused on preserving exotic and remote landscapes and endangered species. This movement has been foreign and seemingly irrelevant to a large segment of the global population. The narrative of what “environment” means in the West was perpetuated by early settlers and 19th century conservationists, preservationists and transcendentalists. Transcendentalism preached discontent with society and urged a return to the “savageness” of nature to “live deliberately” for self-reflection.⁴ Immersive and experiential, transcendentalism emphasized the process of *being* in nature, seeking morality, spiritual truth and knowledge, a theme environmental education has espoused. The explicit separation of the natural world from civilization, however, set the foundation of a predominant feeling that nature is pristine and remote, separate from human society—a moral entitlement to dominate nature present in a long tradition of literature and philosophy.⁵

Participating in and enjoying the environment should be among the most accessible amenities in life. It is the space in which we all live, yet various economic, cultural, and historic barriers prevent certain marginalized groups of people from fully capitalizing on this right. Not

³ Connecticut State Department of Education, “School Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2017-2018.”

⁴ Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press, 2014.

⁵ Vining, Joanne, Melinda S. Merrick, and Emily A. Price. "The distinction between humans and nature: Human perceptions of connectedness to nature and elements of the natural and unnatural." *Human Ecology Review* (2008): 1-11.

only has this historic prioritization of one environmental narrative given the misimpression that environmental experiences are inaccessible to people without the time or financial means to travel to such faraway places, but it has drastically limited the number of people who feel welcome or motivated to work to protect the environment during this critical time.

Environmentalism goes beyond science and ecology to include social, political, economic and moral factors in fighting environmental racism and examining the policies and historical patterns that create these inequalities.

Common Ground breaks with the privileged transcendentalist and exploratory narrative of nature that created the misimpression that “outdoorsy” experiences must take place in far-off, foreign landscapes. Instead, it returns to the true definition of “environment” as *the surrounding area*. Expanding environmentalism and environmental education from a purely ecological lens to include problems that affect people as well, and especially problems that affect poor communities, makes the field more relevant to a broader population, inviting more people to work together as environmental stewards. Common Ground focuses on place-based education—learning about and connecting to their immediate environment before scaling up and relating this to the health of the planet. The founders identified a goal: “to promote healthy lifestyles and model environmental practices at a working demonstration farm, school and environmental center in New Haven.”⁶ This mission is twofold; first to teach its students about their environment, but also to teach its students *with* the environment.

Research shows that place-based learning and culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy, especially with hands-on experiential components, are successful ways of fostering meaningful connections with the environment—first with the immediate community, and then

⁶ Ibid.

with the broader world. Common Ground has come to a similar conclusion through a homegrown environmental and social justice mission that reflects the values and needs of their students, teachers and community. Though I came into this project understanding environmental and social justice as two distinct, albeit undeniably interrelated, concepts, I learned through interviews with thoughtful, caring teachers, much the way Common Ground students do, a much more holistic understanding—that environmental and social justice are one and the same; caring for and fighting for the rights of an environment is doing the same for its people. Throughout its history, the school has continued to evolve to balance a curriculum that honors this justice-oriented mission with achieving high academic standards mandated by the state.

Through this capstone project I attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How has Common Ground’s curriculum changed since the school’s conception and
 - a. what has driven these changes (test scores, policies, teachers’ interests, funding, students’ interests, etc.)?
 - b. what has been the result of these changes (people’s responses and understanding, school culture, school policies, etc.)?
2. How has Common Ground adapted its mission over the years to balance high standards and an environmental justice focus?
 - a. When have they felt they’ve ever strayed from one of these two missions?
 - b. How did they rebalance?
3. How does Common Ground’s curriculum and mission fit into the literature base?

I have the unique perspective of being directly involved in Common Ground as the Yale Public School Intern (PSI) during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years. As a PSI I worked as classroom support for one semester of a 10th grade social studies class, a multi-age

group sustainable design elective, and an upperclassman environmental history elective, two semesters of an elective about food and the environment, and five semesters of the seniors' social justice capstone project seminar. I also helped with after-school writing workshops, supported students also enrolled in Yale classes, was a reader and advisor for senior capstone project and college applications, designed projects to enrich the classes I worked in, and observed staff meetings. My involvement with Common Ground allowed me to pursue my interests in environment and education in a practical, intersecting way and lay the foundation for this project. Much of my contextual knowledge about the school comes from my experience in classrooms and around students and faculty. My direct involvement with Common Ground may also be a limitation of this project, however, as my own bias may be a concern. I do not anticipate this conflict of interest posing any major problems because, first of all, my position at Common Ground will end in the Spring of 2020 with this project so I will not have any future ramifications regarding my relationship with the school, and secondly, the faculty members have been extremely open and candid with me and I do not take an extreme stance on controversial topics that the school is not already open about.

This project relies on primary source interviews with teachers and administrators at Common Ground (Appendix B), a focus group with students at Common Ground (Appendix C), and secondary source literature review to contextualize the Common Ground case study. I begin by reviewing the relevant literature to provide a base for the findings of my case study. First, explaining what environmental education is, its history and tradition, I provide necessary background information about the field in which Common Ground is situated. Next I move into the problem of a lack of diversity in environmentalism as a whole due to a historic prioritization of white, upper-middle-class narratives. I also review the benefits of place-based learning and

culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy recommendations to begin addressing this problem. Finally, I discuss the academic standards the state of Connecticut holds Common Ground to, providing an external tension the school has to manage along with its own internal affairs. These academic papers inform why Common Ground's specific goals, policies and decisions make sense pedagogically, culturally and historically.

After providing this context, I use Common Ground as a case study of an urban public school that has implemented a culturally-responsive environmental curriculum. This section focuses on Common Ground's history and present-day, attempting to create a timeline of the various stages its curriculum has gone through while trying to balance its environmental mission with state-mandated academic standards. Because no formal body of literature exists documenting the thought processes, discussions and reasoning behind the decisions made in Common Ground's founding and evolution, I interview willing teachers, administrators, and students to answer my research questions. Common Ground is unique in encouraging its entire community to partake in curriculum-building, therefore I have interviewed teachers, administrators, and students who have been involved in this process. Teachers and administrators—the people who have been at Common Ground for a long time and therefore witnessed many stages of the process—have detailed and informed my understanding of Common Ground's curricular history. These perspectives provide different angles into the circumstances at different periods throughout Common Ground's history and what was happening when changes were made, what might've prompted these changes, and how different groups responded to and understood each.

While I attempt to do Common Ground's history justice, I am only be able to piece together my own understanding of their stories. Their stories, however, paint a unique, vibrant

history at the intersection of the fields of environmental education, diversity in environmentalism, place-based learning, culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy, and the Connecticut State Department of Education academic standards. Common Ground's model could provide guidelines for other similar schools that understand the importance of cultivating passionate leaders in the environmental field. I cannot provide a one-size-fits-all approach because every school is different, with different environments, student bodies, faculty members and communities, and different values and needs. This project can, however, document how a group of passionate, hardworking, sensitive leaders have made a difference in their community, and hope to inspire others.

II. Literature Review

This literature review establishes the context for the case study of Common Ground. While Common Ground's mission and circumstances are relatively uncommon, its principles are not novel. There exists a thorough literature base about environmental education, the lack of diversity in environmentalism, place-based learning, and culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy. These topics come together to create context for understanding Common Ground's mission and curriculum. While Common Ground's founders may not have officially used this literature base to inform their decisions, scholars, experts and the school founders had similar thought processes and conclusions. Common Ground's environmentally-just curriculum came from a thoughtful, passionate, sensitive and driven group of people who wanted to create environmental stewards. They appreciated the value of environmental and place-based education, cared about the lack of diversity in environmentalism, and had the desire to make change through culturally-responsive curriculums. One major external tension that Common Ground has faced

amidst its own visions and adaptations, however, has been the state-mandated academic standards. This literature review ends with a consideration of this additional component that the school must balance in order to succeed with its own mission.

1. What is Environmental Education?

There exist many types of environmental education in the US—field work, outdoor education, conservation education, urban education, to name a few—that span a wide range of subjects, philosophies, and audiences. The “classic” definition of environmental education was formulated at the 1970 International Union for Conservation Nature (IUCN)/ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) “International Working Meeting on Environmental Education in the School Curriculum” in Carson City, Nevada. The meeting agreed upon environmental education as “the process of recognizing values and clarifying concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the inter-relatedness among man, his culture, and his biophysical surroundings.”⁷ They also decided environmental education includes “practice in decision-making and self-formulation of a code of behaviour about issues concerning environmental quality.”⁸ Over the course of the 1970s, the UN established various programs focused on developing environmental education for primary and secondary school curricula. In 1975 UNESCO summarized the objectives of environmental education as follows: “to foster clear awareness of and concern about economic, social, political, and ecological inter-dependence in urban and rural areas; to provide every person with

⁷ Gough, Noel. "Joy A. Palmer 1998, Environmental Education in the 21st Century: Theory, Practice, Progress and Promise, Routledge, London." *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 15 (1999): 165-166.

⁸ Ibid.

opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment and skills needed to protect and improve the environment;” and “to create new patterns of behaviour of individuals, groups and society as a whole towards the environment.”⁹

The 1970s environmental education movement came out of a growing concern for the environmental issues of air and water pollution, land and resource use, and wildlife protection. The movement aimed to use the environment as a medium to bring these issues into school curriculums at all levels of learning to impress concern and passion for the natural world on young students. The traditional thinking has been to change individuals’ behavior by teaching about environmental problems. However, recent scholarship has found that knowledge of action strategies, action skills, the desire to act, and other situational factors are more important than knowledge alone.¹⁰ Students who are predisposed to knowledge about and interest in the environment can take ownership of these issues and feel equipped and empowered to take action.¹¹ From early movements to more current ones, environmental education programs have stressed the importance of a holistic approach, interdisciplinary in nature, that emphasizes the importance of hands-on experience and problem-solving. Environmental education is “about,” “from,” and “for” the environment: using the physical space to discover information about the environment, develop concern for environmental issues, and learn problem solving strategies to enact change.¹²

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hungerford, Harold R., and Trudi L. Volk. "Changing learner behavior through environmental education." *The journal of environmental education* 21.3 (1990): 8-21.

¹¹ Chawla, Louise, and Debra Flanders Cushing. "Education for strategic environmental behavior." *Environmental education research* 13.4 (2007): 437-452.

¹² Neal, Philip, and Joy Palmer. *The handbook of environmental education*. Routledge, 2003.

2. Lack of Diversity in Environmentalism

Not only did early American philosophies prioritize a “classic,” exclusionary view of the environment, but environmental regulations, burdens, and a lack of inclusion have disadvantaged the poor. For instance, the classic environmental protection of pollution amelioration, hazard and risk management, resource protection and conservation have only been ameliorated in wealthier areas, while a lack of diversity in the movement and in policymakers have yielded narrow solutions.¹³ The 1970s movement to integrate environmental education into primary and secondary school curricula was incompatible with the compartmentalized Western education system, as well as with many of the people it hoped to serve. Much of the environmental education in the 20th century did not take place in classrooms but in private outdoors conservation programs like summer camps, scouting, Outward Bound, and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). These programs harken back to traditional environmental education: taking place in remote, pristine outdoor locations, participating in strenuous activities to build leadership, self-confidence, adventurousness and interpersonal skills, and, ultimately, an appreciation for nature and the desire to protect it.¹⁴ Not only are these environmental experiences difficult to access geographically and financially for a significant portion of the population, but this narrow lens of environmental experiences is totally foreign to urban students who would have to “divorce themselves from their surroundings and familiar experiences” to

¹³ Simms, Patrice Lumumba. "On diversity and public policymaking: An environmental justice perspective." *Sustainable Dev. L. & Pol'y* 13 (2012): 14.

¹⁴ Goldenberg, Marni, and Dan Pronsolino. "A means-end investigation of outcomes associated with Outward Bound and NOLS programs." *Journal of Experiential Education* 30.3 (2008): 271-276.

separate their own cultural experiences in the outdoors from the prevailing wealthy white view of nature.¹⁵

Various hypothesis behind this exclusion include the “Access Hypothesis,” which suggests that low-income communities have less access to environmental goods, such as parks, lakes and other natural areas in their neighborhoods; the “Exclusion Hypothesis,” which explains that “the outdoors” is often perceived as a space for white, upper/middle-class, able-bodied, highly-educated males; and the “Marginality Hypothesis,” which postulates that minorities have low participation in outdoor activities because of limited economic resources needed to partake in camping, backpacking, outdoors programs, etc. due to historic discrimination.¹⁶ Studies also suggest that because of historical privileging of transcendentalists’ and explorers’ declaration of nature as a liberating environment for leisure, exploration, and freedom, other groups’ experiences with the outdoors have largely been ignored. Some groups may have painful and negative associations with the outdoors, such as slavery, sharecropping, lynching, misappropriated culture, spiritual practices, or scratching out a living.¹⁷ Completely incompatible with John Muir and Henry David Thoreau’s dominant viewpoint as nature as a place of refuge, these narratives expand the frame of humans’ relationship with the natural world. A new grassroots environmentalism has come out as a backlash to this narrow, wilderness-centered

¹⁵ Taylor, Dorceta E. "Making multicultural environmental education a reality." *Race, Poverty & the Environment* (1996): 3-6.

¹⁶ Floyd, Myron F., James H. Gramann, and Rogelio Saenz. "Ethnic factors and the use of public outdoor recreation areas: The case of Mexican Americans." *Leisure Sciences* 15.2 (1993): 83-98.

¹⁷ Warren, Karen, et al. "Social justice in outdoor experiential education: A state of knowledge review." *Journal of Experiential Education* 37.1 (2014): 89-103.

view of the environment both to protect low-income and minority communities from harm, but also to value a broader view of environmentalism.¹⁸

3. Benefits of Place-Based Learning

Place-based learning uses the local community and environment as the foundation and context for teaching curricular school subjects, often including a strong hands-on, experiential learning component. Learning through engagement with the surrounding environment allows students to explore, engaging their senses and providing deeper learning. This type of outdoor learning and freedom for exploration is not only critical for physical, cognitive and social development, but the impact of learning has proven to be deeper and longer-lasting when it is “discovered, observed, sensed, and interpreted in the natural setting” because being in the outdoors engages all of the senses.^{19, 20} Place-based education also aims to bridge the disconnect between school and children’s lives by teaching students how to be citizens in their communities. This approach stands in contrast to traditional schooling that can be seen as detached from the world.²¹ This philosophy recognizes that students’ social realities are a valuable type of knowledge and encourages students to explore that reality and eventually scale it up to regional, national and international levels.²² Common elements of place-based learning include using the surrounding area as a foundation, encouraging the students to be creators of knowledge and to

¹⁸ Silveira, Stacy J. "The American environmental movement: surviving through diversity." *BC Env'tl. Aff. L. Rev.* 28 (2000): 497.

¹⁹ Paci, Sophie. "Outside the Walls: Exploring the Benefits of Outdoor-Based Learning for Children’s Development."

²⁰ Hammerman, William M. *Fifty Years of Resident Outdoor Education, 1930-1980: Its Impact on American Education.* 1980.

²¹ Smith, Gregory A. "Place-based education: Learning to be where we are." *Phi delta kappan* 83.8 (2002): 584-594.

²² Ibid.

participate in the curriculum, having teachers as guides and co-learners, and fostering a relationship and flow between the school and community.²³

David Sobel, a renowned champion of place-based education, urges the importance of connecting school learning to the community through projects between local businesses, museums and organizations as learning spaces for students, but also encouraging students to contribute to their communities.²⁴ The emphasis on community is directly related to connecting with the earth and this connection with place helps determine students' identity; an explicit focus on how place relates to colonial and power dynamics can also help students understand and develop their own identities and cultural histories and promote civic engagement while providing a quality education.²⁵ One model put forth is using the environment as an "integrating context for learning," in which the environment serves as a framework to use the school's surroundings and community to conduct personalized learning guided by the teachers.²⁶ The pride and ownership that comes from such interdisciplinary, collaborative projects that focus on real-life problem solving with tangible impacts in students' immediate communities make students more enthusiastic about learning. This approach can be applied across diverse geographic and socioeconomic regions.²⁷ In his definition of place-based learning, Sobel acknowledges that

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sobel, David. *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms & communities*. Orion Society, 2004.

²⁵ McInerney, Peter, John Smyth, and Barry Down. "Coming to a place near you?' The politics and possibilities of a critical pedagogy of place-based education." *Asia-Pacific journal of teacher education* 39.1 (2011): 3-16.

²⁶ Lieberman, Gerald A., and Linda L. Hoody. "Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning. Results of a Nationwide Study." (1998).

²⁷ Ibid.

“Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school.”²⁸

Though the origins of place-based learning came out of traditional environmental values with Aldo Leopold, an American ecological philosopher and conservationist who was an early believer in place-based education, these community values were lost in the backlash to traditional environmentalism.²⁹ The new grassroots movement that sprang from this backlash emphasized the importance of explicit integration of diversity and cultural-responsiveness within the framework of place-based learning.

4. Culturally-Responsive Environmental Pedagogy

Crucial to combating homogeneity in environmental education is implementing culturally-responsive pedagogies towards each particular group of students’ experiences. By having a curriculum that upholds and prioritizes values that only apply to a select, homogenous group, environmental education systematically excludes a significant population of students from being able to partake in what could be a meaningful experience. Experts in culturally-responsive pedagogy have written literature with recommendations for environmental educators, outlined in this section. Most importantly, successfully including a diversity of experiences requires community involvement to ensure the curriculum reflects their values, experiences and traditions.³⁰

²⁸ Sobel, “Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities.”

²⁹ Knapp, Clifford E. "The “I–thou” relationship, place-based education, and Aldo Leopold." *Journal of experiential education* 27.3 (2005): 277-285.

³⁰ Euler, James S. "Developing an Outdoor Education Program for Public Schools. Fact Sheet." (1981).

Experts write that expanding the course of study to include a variety of experiences is crucial for environmental education; however, curriculum-makers must be cautious not to create another static, albeit more diverse, curriculum. Just as traditional rote methods in outdoor education must be changed to address a more diverse group of students, a culturally-responsive pedagogy must be progressive and constantly adapted as the group changes from season to season. A “one size fits all” method, while seemingly efficient, does not work with ever-changing, unique, heterogeneous groups.³¹ Environmental educators can administer self-assessments to evaluate what they are doing well and what methods work, and identify areas they need to improve.³² This process of constant assessment and adaptation will tailor the curriculum to each group’s unique cultures, experiences, and backgrounds.

Similar to the issue of foreign curriculum material, a common complaint among students of color and low-income students who have participated in outdoor education is that instructors are culturally alienating and incompetent with matters of diversity, therefore creating an experiential gap between outdoor education leaders and low-income and minority students.³³ To bridge this gap, outdoor education programs can train all staff in diversity and inclusion, specifically intention, self-awareness and intervention.³⁴ Furthermore, recruiting staff (and students) directly from disadvantaged communities will help diversify the population and the experiences in outdoor education and bridge the experiential gap. Cultivating a group of teachers that are qualified, who care about the school’s mission and values, are well-versed in

³¹ Warren, Karen. "A call for race, gender, and class sensitive facilitation in outdoor experiential education." *Journal of Experiential Education* 21.1 (1998): 21-25.

³² Sievert, Nate. "Diversity and Inclusion in Environmental Education: Case Studies of Promising Organizational Change." (2017).

³³ Warren, et. al., “Social Justice in Outdoor Experiential Education.”

³⁴ Ibid.

environmental issues, *and* who are able to be sensitive to and reflect the diversity of the student body is a challenge, so diversity and cultural sensitivity training must be thorough and ongoing. As leaders have enormous potential to influence their students, ensuring they have the ability to reach each of their students is crucial.

Creating inclusive curriculums and leadership in outdoor education requires more than just adding diversity, but also implementing deeper structural changes in the core values of the program. Expanding the traditional values of individualism and leadership to include family, harmony of nature, spontaneity, same-race support, creative expression and honoring cultural differences, as Karen Warren argues, is a monumental step in bridging cultural differences and allowing a diverse population of students to relate to outdoor education curriculums.³⁵ Angela Park encourages outdoor education programs to examine diversity and inclusion holistically and why these values are important. She suggests incorporating these values into the programs' mission statements from the start so programs ensure that every initiative and decision furthers their mission of diversity and inclusion as they rebuild.³⁶ To ensure these values are deep and authentic, not tokenizing, Park stresses the importance of fully understanding and appreciating the benefits diverse experiences can bring to the program. Incorporating these values into the purpose of the program by writing them into the mission statement from the very beginning is the first step toward directing the program along the path of diversity and inclusion.

While negative connotations with the outdoors may deter marginalized groups from participating in some cases, participating in the natural world can also empower marginalized

³⁵ Warren, Karen. "Preparing the next generation: Social justice in outdoor leadership education and training." *Journal of experiential education* 25.1 (2002): 231-238.

³⁶ Park, Angela. "Mission Critical: A new frame for diversity and environmental progress." *Diversity and the future of the environmental movement*. Emily Enderle, ed (2007): 35-49.

groups to reclaim the space. Instead of forcing marginalized groups into the current narrow, homogenous frame of environmentalism, expanding the realm of environmentalism by including their existing connections could help with this empowerment and reclamation. Warren, Roberts, Breunig and Alvarez write that, “by talking about communities as ‘others’ who need to be saved by programmatic, structured experiences in the outdoors, professionals are missing the existing empowered connections to nature informed by the communities themselves.”³⁷ A multicultural narrative, they write, is an empowering one.

5. State-Mandated Academic Standards

The Connecticut State Department of Education holds charter schools accountable for four performance standards in order to maintain their charter: school performance; stewardship, governance, and management; student population; and legal compliance.³⁸ When assessing a school along these standards, the state looks at students, educators, instruction and resources, performance and accountability, and narratives from the school. The Connecticut State Department of Education publishes a performance report every year, and uses the “Next Generation Accountability System” to “tell the story of how well a district/school is preparing its students for success in college, career, and life.”³⁹ When assessing Common Ground in comparison to the rest of Connecticut, the state determined the following:

³⁷ Warren, et. al., “Social Justice in Outdoor Experiential Education.”

³⁸ Connecticut State Department of Education, “Connecticut’s Charter Schools: Best Practices Annual Report.” 2017-2018.

³⁹ Connecticut State Department of Education, “District Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2017-2018.”

Next Generation Accountability Results

Indicator		Index/Rate	Target	Points Earned	Max Points	% Points Earned	State Average Index/Rate
ELA Performance Index	All Students	54.8	75	73.1	100	73.1	67.6
	High Needs Students	45.0	75	60.0	100	60.0	57.5
Math Performance Index	All Students	49.0	75	65.3	100	65.3	62.7
	High Needs Students	42.5	75	56.7	100	56.7	52.0
ELA Academic Growth	All Students	N/A	100%	0.0	0	0.0	60.7%
	High Needs Students	N/A	100%	0.0	0	0.0	55.6%
Math Academic Growth	All Students	N/A	100%	0.0	0	0.0	61.9%
	High Needs Students	N/A	100%	0.0	0	0.0	55.4%
Chronic Absenteeism	All Students	15.5%	<=5%	29.0	50	58.0	10.7%
	High Needs Students	19.0%	<=5%	21.9	50	43.8	16.6%
Preparation for CCR	% Taking Courses	55.3%	75%	36.9	50	73.7	74.8%
	% Passing Exams	35.3%	75%	23.5	50	47.1	44.8%
On-track to High School Graduation		87.3%	94%	46.4	50	92.9	87.5%
4-year Graduation All Students (2017 Cohort)		86.0%	94%	91.5	100	91.5	87.9%
6-year Graduation - High Needs Students (2015 Cohort)		100.0%	94%	100.0	100	100.0	81.8%
Postsecondary Entrance (Class of 2017)		62.2%	75%	82.9	100	82.9	70.9%
Physical Fitness (estimated part rate) and (fitness rate)		171.8% 14.9%	75%	10.0	50	19.9	96.6% 50.1%
Arts Access		63.6%	60%	50.0	50	100.0	51.2%
Accountability Index				747.3	1050	71.2	

Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System is a broad set of 12 indicators that help tell the story of how well a district/school is preparing its students for success in college, careers, and life. It moves beyond test scores and graduation rates to provide a more holistic, multifactor perspective of district and school performance.⁴⁰

This data from 2018-2019 is especially important in this 2019-2020 school year as Common Ground is up for their charter renewal to make sure the school is “achieving, maintaining, and continuously improving outcomes and operations” aligned with the performance standards.⁴¹ The school is rated as “meets,” “pending action,” or “does not meet” each standard and can either be granted a 5-year charter renewal, a 3-year charter renewal with specific conditions and/or reporting requirements, or a non-renewal/charter school closure.⁴² A review team visits the school site and conducts a school tour, a meeting with the finance/operations manager, classroom observations, a special education review, a meeting with

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kelly, R. Memo to Liz Cox, Common Ground High School, New Haven, CT. 3 May 2019.

⁴² Ibid.

the charter school director/principal, an English learner review, faculty focus groups, a meeting with the board of directors, and parent/community focus groups.⁴³ The school is then evaluated on each performance standard with a rubric (Appendix D). Common Ground's charter was up for review this 2019-2020 academic school year and renewal results will appear later in this paper.

III. Methodology

The Common Ground case study is primarily an oral history that relies on interviews. The school director helped identify teachers and other administrators to interview, whom I emailed directly asking for their participation (Appendix A). I reached out to 12 faculty members from a variety of positions and subjects and grade-levels taught, eight of whom agreed to participate: four teachers (three English and one social studies) and four administrators (who have all taught in some capacity as well). Seven of these faculty members were white, one was black; four identified as female, four identified as male; two were first generation in their family to go to college, four were not, and two were unsure. I also conducted a focus group with five students (two juniors and three seniors) who have been involved in the curriculum-building process. All students volunteered to participate and all minors received parental consent. One of these students was white, three were Latinx, and one was mixed race; four identified as female, one as male; and all five would be first generation in their family to go to college. To conduct these interviews, I applied for and received IRB approval. Interviews were conducted in person on Common Ground's campus or, when necessary, over the phone. All interviews are anonymous to protect participants and to avoid vague, partial or dishonest answers.

⁴³ Ibid.

When analyzing these interviews, I looked to see how they answer my research question and how they fit into the literature base. Common Ground prides itself on having a homegrown curriculum that has developed from the ground up—who they are comes from the students, teachers, families and community. While ecology and place-based learning has been present at Common Ground from the beginning, the founders did not so much talk about topical literature, but were inspired by authors such as Wendell Berry and Octavia Butler who wrote about sense of place and the natural world. Rather than rooting their mission and curriculum in pieces of literature that have been written about environmental justice education, Common Ground founders and current administrators came to their decisions through common values, perspectives and inspiration. Both Common Ground and the researchers who have written about environmental justice education have come to very similar conclusions about how these curriculums should look independently and organically.

IV. Voices from Common Ground

For over 20 years, Common Ground High School has thoughtfully and intentionally planned, implemented and revised its curriculum to best serve its students. This section integrates the voices that tell this story: four administrators, four teachers, and five students. Because the school is so small, I have taken out any identifying information that might reduce the anonymity of participants, such as subject taught. Everything in the following section has been synthesized from interviews; findings are either cited and attributed to a specific person, or amalgamate ideas from multiple interviews. Interviews revealed that every iteration of the school's curriculum, from founding to the present, has been a dynamic process, striving for student empowerment and success. While they did not explicitly root their school model or

curricular development in the literature base, Common Ground’s themes and values share many similarities with what experts have written about environmental education, place-based learning, and culturally-relevant environmental pedagogy. Common Ground’s curriculum has seen three prominent phases; from founding to the present, the school has constantly reassessed and rebalanced their mission and curriculum to ensure they were achieving high academic standards, staying true to their values and identity as an environmental school, and staying relevant and respectful to their community.

1. Curricular History

Common Ground began as the New Haven Ecology Project in 1990, establishing the farm, school and community environmental education center it is today. At the time, the whole organization strove for the mission “to cultivate habits of healthy living and sustainable environmental practices within a diverse community of young people, adults, and families.”⁴⁴ The idea was born when a group of New Haven students had the idea of starting an ecology high school, and founders wanted to bring more environmental education into New Haven schools and excite students about their environment and their city. When Connecticut approved Common Ground among the first ten charters in 1997, the small group of teachers and students built the school from the ground up, removing invasive species and tons of illegally-dumped trash from the site.⁴⁵ The charter school began with 67 students, six teachers, no written curriculum, and a strong grassroots community focusing on problems in education, environment, and the food

⁴⁴ New Haven Ecology Project, Inc. “Common Ground Charter School Proposal: Executive Summary,” 1997.

⁴⁵ “History.” *Common Ground*, 10 Apr. 2017, <http://commongroundct.org/about/history/>.

system. From the start, Common Ground showed strong themes of place-based environmental focus, student and community involvement, and teacher dedication.

The first phase of Common Ground’s curriculum was rooted in the founders’ passions to show students the interconnectedness of everything and how to infuse the environment and their lives into educational classroom experiences. A Common Ground social worker, past board chair and site manager said of the original teachers, “When you believe in something you do things well beyond what normally would be required of you or that people would do. They were invested in the whole aspect, everything—the community of what Common Ground was.”⁴⁶ Classes were largely driven by teachers’ passions, though with a commitment to make material relevant and engaging to students. Along with some more traditional academic classes, students took block classes, which were taught by teams of two teachers across different disciplines. Examples included “Ecología,” taught between ecology and Spanish; “Four Corners,” about New Haven’s neighborhoods taught through history and documentary; and “Power,” using math, politics and civics to learn about energy. These classes were long, had high engagement, and were inherently interdisciplinary. While these classes provided some deep, rich experiences, they were not standards-based, however, resulting in extremely low test scores. Students were underperforming in the standard metrics for academic success, placing Common Ground on the list of schools needing improvement during the No Child Left Behind era.

These low test scores were the original impetus for the second phase of Common Ground’s curriculum, focused on raising academic standards. Faculty felt that the lack of coherence across classes was doing little to help students become stronger readers, writers and problem solvers across disciplines. In 2004, with expert standards-based consultants paid for by

⁴⁶ “From The Ground Up.”

the state, Common Ground began to shift instruction towards standards and testing, establishing a tightened and more streamlined curriculum. In order to stay open as a charter school and continue serving its community, Common Ground was obligated to reset their priorities until scores increased.

One teacher thought back to the curriculum redevelopment process, “We did not start from principles of sustainability or ecology or environmentalism,” he recalled. “We started from literacy and math standards, which are important, but it is interesting that we did not take our starting point in environmental education or our environmental mission, we took our starting point in the academic standards that you would find in any other school.”⁴⁷ Multiple faculty members agreed with this sentiment, feeling like the school began to stray from its original environmental focus, or at least putting it second to the academic standards. While they tried to stay true to their mission, this shift in priority made a profound change in the school. The same teacher reflected that “Now it’s a challenge to start from scratch with a course or even work into a course those environmental standards that were missing because we’ve already developed the courses along standard academic literacy and math standards. The big structural issue,” he said, “is we did not take the mission as the starting point for redeveloping the curriculum. We took standard high school standards.”⁴⁸

The move to standards-driven education reform was part of a larger shift in the school’s development. In 2009, shortly after their shift to standards-based reform, Common Ground attempted to move back to its environmental mission. During this time, they updated the high school’s mission statement:

⁴⁷ Teacher 2, interview 6 Feb, 2020.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Common Ground High School will graduate students with the knowledge, skills, and understanding to live healthy, powerful, and productive lives. We do so through authentic learning that develops academic excellence, ecological literacy, strong character, and commitment to community.

Common Ground High School takes the urban environment as its organizing focus. Common Ground uses three sites as laboratories for learning: the urban farm that is the school's campus, the natural environment of the adjacent West Rock Ridge State Park, and the urban setting of New Haven, Connecticut. Close study of these places develops understanding of local and global issues. Through this study and core academic work, students experience a rigorous high school curriculum that prepares them for competitive colleges, meaningful careers, and purposeful lives.⁴⁹

With this update, Common Ground maintained their academic, environmental, community-focused values and identity. They moved from a leadership model in which a school coordinator was elected by the faculty to a two-year term, to one in which a school director led the school. Along with this shift in school leadership structure and towards standards-based and data-driven planning, there was also systematic work around school culture. They formed an environmental leadership committee that developed a schoolwide strategy around environmental mission alignment and hired a part-time and a full-time staff person focused on environmental leadership and sustainability. This process led to the development of environmental leadership standards for community members to strive for and uphold, called POWER standards (POWER stands for Pride, Ownership, Wonder, Effort and Respect), and over time an environmental leadership portfolio for all students to reflect on their time at Common Ground and to defend in their senior year. With staff capacity focused on environmental leadership, they also began developing systems for teachers to name and commit to integrating environmental leadership standards and

⁴⁹ Common Ground, "Mission, Values, Strategic Priorities, CEIO Outcomes," 2009.

place-based experiences into their courses. This development was still piecemeal and not part of an overall four-year sequence that would come later, but resulted in some rich work.⁵⁰

These shifts in curriculum, culture, and leadership led to dramatic progress, which reinforced the work they did. In 2013, a press release praised the “significant gains” Common Ground students posted on their Connecticut Academic Performance Test since 2007.⁵¹ The percentage of students scoring “proficient” or better doubled in every subject area, and in 2014 Common Ground was named a Connecticut School of Distinction.^{52, 53}

Despite these major successes and shifts back towards their original mission, faculty still found inconsistencies in the magnitude and latitude of what students had been learning, realizing they could go through Common Ground missing the environmental aspect almost entirely. While the option for students to engage with the environment, the outdoors, and the farm persisted, there was little academic connection to these experiences—the environmental focus was no longer a universal experience like it had been for all students with the block classes. Feeling the school had strayed away slightly from its core identity with the increased academic rigor, faculty and students alike came together to create a core curriculum. The students and faculty on the team worked to make sure that, while the new curriculum was rooted in academic rigor, it still reflected the community’s desire for culturally-relevant environmental education. First, they documented what was already happening on the ground. Then they strategized about how to align individual grade levels along academic standards, using rubrics and data, then with social

⁵⁰ Paragraph summarized from Joel Tolman, Director of Impact and Engagement’s comments, 18 Apr, 2020.

⁵¹ Common Ground High School, Urban Farm, and Environmental Education Center. “Common Ground Students Continue Academic Growth.” *Common Ground Press Release*, 13 Aug, 2020.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Summarized from Joel Tolman, Director of Impact and Engagement’s comments, 18 Apr, 2020.

and environmental justice. Finally, they aligned all four years' material to build on each other to develop strong environmental themes of sense of place.

The 2017-2018 academic school year marked the beginning of this third phase in Common Ground's curriculum. Maintaining strong aspects from both previous iterations of the curriculum, this third phase attempted to fully integrate environmental themes with reading, writing and problem-solving skills. The core curriculum is meant to root rigorous academic learning in relevant environmental experiences based on students' sense of place. Beginning in ninth grade, students set out on their core journey ("Core 9"), combining four of their eight classes—math, science, social studies, and English—to learn about their immediate environment: Common Ground. Core 9 is designed to allow students to explore their own identities, learn about the school community, and become familiar with the 20-acre campus.⁵⁴ Core 10 then expands its environmental realm slightly, dedicated to learning about "stories, justice, change, power, and health in the city of New Haven" through science, social studies, English and the arts.⁵⁵

Junior year, students agreed, is the year it all really starts to come together. Students begin choosing their own elective classes, can participate in environmental jobs and internships through the school and community, and reflect on their own growth as leaders. Juniors also take a core Junior Seminar course to work towards their futures—SAT preparation, college and/or career goals. Finally, the core experience is tied up in senior year with the Senior Social Justice Capstone, in which students create a portfolio that reflects on their growth as environmental leaders over the course of their years at Common Ground and conduct a research project about

⁵⁴ "Curriculum." *Common Ground*, 27 Dec. 2019, commongroundct.org/high-school/curriculum/.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

an environmental justice-related topic that is meaningful to them in their community. This four-year progression allows students to begin learning the fundamentals of understanding and appreciating their immediate environment, which also exposes them to what Common Ground has to offer. They build on this foundation, learning about their broader environment, and then expanding into bigger environmental issues they are interested in, and finally delve deeply into a meaningful project to document their personal growth as leaders and to contribute back to their communities.

An overarching theme has been helping students build their capacities as changemakers over four years in an intentional way. Not only do they have opportunities to meet changemakers at Common Ground and in New Haven and learn what problem-solving looks like in these realms, but by senior year they draw on these relationships when building their senior projects based on a deep understanding of how they themselves are changemakers around environmental justice in their communities. With this most recent iteration of Common Ground’s curriculum, faculty and students have been pleased with the overall progression of material, the way they’ve integrated environmental and social justice with reading, writing and problem-solving work, how they’ve taken advantage of their environment to deepen learning, and how students have been empowered to co-create curriculum. Today the whole organization’s mission reads:

Common Ground is a center for learning and leadership, inviting people across ages and identities to connect to their urban environment, build community, grow into their full potential, and contribute to a just and sustainable world. We work toward this mission through active, authentic learning rooted in justice and our environment: a farm, in a forest, in a city.⁵⁶

Within this umbrella mission, “Three connected efforts are at the core of Common Ground’s work:”

⁵⁶ “Mission & Values.” *Common Ground*, 10 Mar. 2019, www.commongroundct.org/about/.

The nation's longest-running environmental charter school, creating the next generation of successful college students and powerful environmental leaders; An urban demonstration farm, modeling practices of sustainable agriculture and contributing to a healthy food system for New Haven residents; A community environmental education center, offering programs that connect people of all ages with the natural world while helping them develop habits of sustainable living.⁵⁷

Such a holistic approach, integrating all three aspects of the organization, is representative of the holistic approach used to teach the community about the interconnectedness of the environment. Students learn about algebra, US history, chemistry, creative writing, sustainable design, food and the environment, how to be a leader in their community. They use the farm, the site, the city to learn about their own environments and gain a meaningful grounding in environmental justice.

The curriculum makes sense to students, especially rooting it in their campus, farm and city. Students appreciate understanding their own communities and the problems they face. They recalled learning about social environmental impacts as having an especially striking effect on them; from learning about eminent domain and the housing system, to lead poisoning and air pollution, to food justice, identity, and survival, these students could relate to the material they learned in the classroom, having a lasting impact and empowering them to learn more and make change. A few students did, however, admit to some cons to the core curriculum. If one class wasn't going well for a student, or if teachers didn't communicate, they said, it was like the domino effect through all their classes, since they were all connected and building on each other. Moreover, a few chimed in that some of the curriculum could seem forced at times: the all-level math in 9th grade core, for example, did not necessarily fit as seamlessly into the core curriculum as other classes did. The final core project at the end of each year too, they recalled, was a stressful experience forcing a project that would integrate all four subjects into their topic of

⁵⁷ Ibid.

choice.⁵⁸ Perhaps this was true of the early years of the core curriculum (I interviewed juniors and seniors who were the core “guinea pigs”), or perhaps teachers need to go even further to help students better see the interconnectedness of everything for their projects to be authentic, deep, and meaningful.

A fundamental aspect of the school, many faculty members were attracted to Common Ground for its environmental mission, but for most this was far from the only factor. Wanting to be outside more or to spread the vision of sustainability to younger generations, many teachers saw Common Ground as the perfect environment to teach their passions, while others were completely unfamiliar with environmental education. Common Ground’s model, however, is one that meets people where they are and, through the entire school experience, teaches the interconnectedness of humans and environment. “The way that they taught me was the same way they would teach the students,” one teacher said. “It was exciting to know that I can have an impact by little things that I was being taught to do, whether it was recycling, changing my diet, how much I bought and used, how much garbage I threw away.”⁵⁹ For both faculty and students, this type of interconnectedness and empowerment Common Ground taught them was a major draw. Students talked about being attracted to the strong messages of college-readiness and leader development they heard from Common Ground. They wanted to be prepared to problem-solve and make changes in their communities and in the world.

Though the environmental focus is a major part of the school, empowering all community members is another. Perhaps more than learning about ecology or the food system, teachers were inspired by providing students with a “non-standard education, no matter what the focus was.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Paragraph summarized from student forum, 4 Mar, 2020.

⁵⁹ Teacher 3, interview 10 Feb, 2020.

⁶⁰ Administrator 3, interview 13 Feb, 2020.

Teachers and students alike have been drawn to Common Ground for its alternative learning environment. Almost all teachers and students interviewed mentioned they were attracted to the school's small size (which has grown to about 200 students today), allowing for a close-knit community, profound relationships, and better learning. Teachers talked about being disillusioned with the public school system and that Common Ground's size and general ethos provided an option for students who struggled in traditional schooling and for teachers who wanted to be re-inspired. Whether students were bullied in their previous schools, were unmotivated or unenthused by school, or struggled to keep up with their prescribed grade-level, Common Ground provides a reinvigorating, flexible and understanding alternative for them.

2. Environmental and Social Justice

Though Common Ground has maintained an environmental focus throughout its history, this focus has shifted slightly since its start. One teacher recalled that when he first arrived at Common Ground in the early 2000s, the school had a "classical" environmental focus: trees, wildlife, wilderness.⁶¹ Science classes adopted these themes well, but some other teachers admitted to being unsure how to integrate such environmental themes into their classes. Though students had opportunities to engage with the farm, the site, green jobs and internships, many reported feeling a disconnect with the environment. There lacked an explicit focus on the urban environment students lived in and were familiar with, or the environmental injustices they experienced in their everyday lives. The academic progression built over four years that came with the core curriculum attempted to organize their environmental mission across disciplines to

⁶¹ Teacher 2.

answer the question, “How do we create a just environment for everyone?”⁶² With this organizing question, Common Ground developed a goal to make their environmental education specific to place.

Coming to the same conclusion as place-based learning experts, Common Ground faculty and students remedied the feelings of disconnect with the outdoors by creating opportunities to connect the material they were learning in classes with the site. An English teacher recalled that early stages of attempting to integrate environmental education into the core curriculum didn’t feel authentic, that being inside and talking about the environment was not enough.⁶³ “Then the English department moved,” she said. “If we’re going to do *Lord of the Flies*, let’s go outside and try to survive. Or if we’re going to do Shakespeare, let’s get a theater company here and perform Shakespeare outside. We started moving toward using the site in a much more sort of codified way and it became more integrated and intentional. We as teachers experienced that, wow, we could do this.”⁶⁴ Classes shifted towards using real life applications of academic material rooted in the environment around them. An algebra class built an understanding of why working with logarithmic scales matters by looking at pH of water bodies and soils across campus and plotting them. A calculus class calculated the volume of the compost pile—an irregular solid.⁶⁵

Another teacher admitted that she had been uncomfortable taking students outside during her first few years at Common Ground because she had no background in classical environmental education. Instead, she approached the environmental theme through neighborhood issues. “We learned about the history and politics of their neighborhoods,” she

⁶² Administrator 3.

⁶³ Teacher 1, interview 6 Feb, 2020.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Administrator 3.

remembered. “We talked a lot about green spaces, what neighborhoods look like, changing communities, what wildlife lived in these native habitats. They were discovering they had concrete parks and food deserts, that they didn’t have birds in their neighborhoods. We started to learn about it together and every day they were coming in telling me what they were seeing.” The personal connection students could create with this material drove changes: “Once it became clear that this was something that was important to the students, to talk about their neighborhoods, to write about them, to learn the history of their neighborhoods, the big things that happened right here in New Haven, the focus really became environmental justice,” this same teacher said. Students’ passions were ignited by learning about the environmental injustices in their own neighborhoods: why they didn’t have parks, weekly trash pickup, trees. They created partnerships with people and organizations in the city to find out who decides where trees are planted and how, and began planting trees all over New Haven.⁶⁶

Students and teachers alike began to feel more comfortable and less overwhelmed being outside when the focus was reoriented to place-based learning. Each class varies with the amount of time spent outdoors—some teachers are more comfortable using the outdoors as a learning lab, while others may not want to take the time out of the class to migrate outside where students might get distracted. Many teachers agreed, however, that while taking students outside decreases teaching time, it also reduces student stress and can be an invaluable tool for engaging students with the material. One teacher recounted how important it was for her to bring students outside because some weren’t allowed to at home where their neighborhoods were too dangerous. She held onto how important it was for students to have a safe environment to be outside in, and made sure to have ample opportunities to root the course material in the site.

⁶⁶ Teacher 3.

Students themselves corroborated this sentiment; one senior reflected on his own comfort with the outdoors since beginning at Common Ground and pointed to the Outdoor Leadership class, an immersive outdoor experience, as the one that helped him feel more comfortable and in touch with the outdoors. “It made me see the world outside just four walls of high school, which can be so easy to just get caught up in,” he said, “and carry the fact that we should respect our environment inside and out because it’s where we’re living. What we do now will affect us in the long run in our lives.”⁶⁷ Place-based learning became a major bridge between life experience and environmental issues for students to have deeper, more meaningful experiential environmental learning, with three lab sites: the farm, the forest, and the city.

In addition to this environmental justice lens and sense of place which helped students become more comfortable with foreign topics or spaces, the school community as a whole delved into social justice more generally in an intentional and thorough way. One white faculty member reflected on the dynamics between faculty and students regarding this social justice push. “There’s a lot of responsibility around how to introduce social justice issues when you have a staff that’s mostly white,” she said. “We can make a lot of growth in trying to be more conscious about some of the decisions we make around here. It’s not enough to say ‘We’re going to talk about racism in this class.’ It needs to have a little bit more work on how we are talking about racism and what context and what are the messages that we want to throw out there as an institution.”⁶⁸ With this challenge in mind, the school hired an outside consultant to dive into white privilege to help them see it from the other side—the students’ side. Many teachers jumped on board with this difficult, intentional work, understanding its importance. Some faculty

⁶⁷ Student 5, Student Forum.

⁶⁸ Administrator 2, interviewed 7 Feb, 2020.

remembered a few teachers resisting at first, however, because of the anxiety or shame that comes with the term “social justice.” “The social justice push was a highly intentional process over the course of several years to get the staff to take this theme as a part of the environmental mission,” one teacher recalled. “That took a lot of work and we lost a number of staff in that effort. They didn’t stick around.”⁶⁹ Once it became clear that social justice was a major part of the environmental mission, however, the majority of the remaining staff was on board and allied. Despite the early tension between the classical environmental people and the explicit social justice push, teachers acknowledged that Common Ground has come to a space where these issues are all connected and, therefore, there is social justice work happening inside and outside of the classroom. The most important part of Common Ground as a social justice school, one teacher decided, was that, as a small place, they were more likely to talk and mediate, tolerate and understand one another.

The interconnectedness between social and environmental justice is undeniable, and while some faculty members and students talked about each individually, many noted that the two were one and the same. “When we say environment, we don’t mean national parks, we mean this part of this city and these students and what is going to create a just, healthy, sustainable world for them,” one teacher noted. “To ignore the social justice problems of the community and society would be negligent. To say, ‘We’re going to study bird species, but we’re not going to talk about incarceration rights’ is privileging one part of the environment at the massive expense of all the other parts of the environment. What is going to be unhealthy for the environment is also going to be unhealthy for the people in the environment.”⁷⁰ Rather than simply including

⁶⁹ Teacher 2.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

these topics, faculty have had to be extremely thoughtful and intentional about how they were integrating them from the start. Utilizing the farm, for example, remains a complicated aspect of Common Ground's social justice mission. "Agriculture is such a complex thing for young people of color, young people living in poverty," one faculty member agreed, "so watching ninth graders come in and embrace the farm as a place where they had power and agency because of intentional decisions that were made in the curriculum and that adults were making in teaching, felt like a real change."⁷¹ Another teacher worried about the extent of some of the messages students were receiving, noting the limitations of the situation. "You can't tell kids they need to eat organic-grown food and health food when they're in a food desert area," she conceded.⁷² Common Ground has to do the best they can within their reality. An overarching hope persisted throughout all faculty accounts: "I hope that all students graduate with intersectional understanding that the environment is bigger than trees and clean air and water, that the environment is what surrounds us," a teacher concluded. "We want to make sure everyone has access to a just environment."⁷³

While the school has created a culturally-relevant social and environmental curriculum for its students, members of the community have approached these topics in varying ways and have had different takeaways. Common Ground uses intentional hiring practices, including explicit language in job postings, job descriptions, and interview questions about what it would mean to work at an organization that has anti-racism and anti-oppression commitments, although inevitably some faculty are better-versed in social justice than are others. A reality of the education system is a shortage of teachers of color, an issue Common Ground faces as well. With

⁷¹ Administrator 3.

⁷² Teacher 1.

⁷³ Teacher 2.

87.5% of teachers white, there still exists a thirst for teachers of color on behalf of the students.⁷⁴ There was, however, an explicit acknowledgment among the teachers that a predominantly white faculty teaching predominantly young people of color have specific work to do about continuing to not step away from conversations about power and privilege and systematic oppression.

Teachers currently at Common Ground take social justice seriously, and do not step away from these conversations; however, perhaps the most striking characteristic was how compassionate and caring they are for their students. “I didn't come in with a strong background in environmental education and I certainly would not have called myself someone who had strong knowledge of social justice,” a teacher reflected. “But I was always compassionate. I felt [social justice] was always something I was living, and I feel like a lot of teachers here probably couldn't name it or label it, but they were always bringing that into the classroom. And so when we started to talk about these things purposefully, building social justice into our curriculum and our day to day, it just made sense.”⁷⁵ Without the label of “social justice,” the teachers at Common Ground do it naturally by caring for their students, and wanting to develop a deeper understanding and care for the world around them. Another teacher concluded, “My work is about human interactions with each other, talking about debatable topics, having the kids look at current events and coming to solutions to large world issues. That's the piece that's always felt like my connection into the work that we do.”⁷⁶

The students, too, are generally kind to each other, especially because of the small environment, and have appreciated the social justice focus and connection to their own lives.

⁷⁴ Connecticut State Department of Education, “School Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2017-2018.”

⁷⁵ Teacher 3.

⁷⁶ Teacher 4, interviewed 13 Feb, 2020.

Students and teachers alike noted that students were more well-versed in social justice vocabulary and perspectives than they were before Common Ground or than most people are until early adulthood, if at all. This broadened point of view has allowed students to see the world through an empowered and equitable lens, students have been more well-informed, more able to communicate about environmental issues, and more able to converse about different perspectives. One faculty member questioned how much more socially aware students actually were than they were before Common Ground, admitting that he thought they were still in the process, but agreed that teachers definitely were.⁷⁷ Students, however, were firm believers in having had their eyes opened to real-world problems through Common Ground's social justice focus. One student admitted to being "anti-school" before she came to Common Ground, frustrated with the lack of connection to the real world, but learning about the interconnectedness and relatable issues at Common Ground was eye-opening.⁷⁸ Overall, students agreed that learning specifics they could relate to the world and their own lives especially resonated with them: learning about the terminology of "undocumented immigrant" and "illegal alien," the difference between race and ethnicity, learning about their own identities, for example.⁷⁹

More than anything, students and faculty all spoke to Common Ground's ability to empower its students. Not only are students highly encouraged to participate in the curriculum-building process and take control of their own educations, but faculty create plenty of other opportunities to empower students. "The classes I chose," one teacher reflected on her own curriculum-building process, "were not only site specific but also trying to give teens more opportunity and more vocabulary, more certification, more nuance so they can speak and be

⁷⁷ Administrator 4, interviewed 24 Feb, 2020.

⁷⁸ Student 3, student forum.

⁷⁹ Student forum.

more active on their own outside of being a student.”⁸⁰ Faculty also reward students who have been upholding specific environmental leadership standards, or POWER standards. Students who exemplify each POWER standard will receive an award and recognition at POWER assemblies a few times per year. POWER standards are posted on the walls around the school, are brought into seniors’ environmental portfolios so they can reflect on how they have developed these skills over their time at Common Ground, and they are recognized at these assemblies as ways to remind and encourage students to refine these leadership qualities to further their larger mission as a school.

While the school community overall is on board with this justice-oriented mission, however, some teachers had concerns. The same teacher who mentioned Common Ground’s limitations felt a slight disconnect between the environmental messaging and the social justice mission. “Maybe people would care more about some of the sacrifices we’re asking for the environment if they had options to have a home” she considered, acknowledging some of the more immediate issues students and families were facing. “A lot of the messages given are ‘don’t eat meat, don’t do this, don’t do that.’ We can’t tell hungry people not to eat meat. Being a vegetarian is a luxury.” She also suggested teaching students more concrete skills beyond just an awareness of social justice issues. Financial and economic training, for example, could be the best social justice tool to better their situations. “The real issue,” she said, “is that when every student has asthma, when most of the students don’t have glasses, when they’re working full time to help pay the rent as well as coming to school, all the knowledge in the world isn’t going to make their headache go away or make the blackboard clear.” Her biggest worry, however, was feeling caught between wanting to empower her students, encourage them to find their voices,

⁸⁰ Administrator 2.

participate in protests, make real changes, but also wanting to protect them. She stressed that asking an already marginalized, disenfranchised population to give even more, to put themselves in danger in protests was unfair. “How are we going to sustain this?” she worried. “How are we going to exist with people the government doesn’t want doing things the government won’t acknowledge exist as problems? How do we fight for dignity? Here I am telling, modeling, going out and fighting for others when it took everything they had just to get here?”⁸¹

Other faculty expressed concerns about the transition within school culture with their explicit shift towards social justice. First, changing the focus of the school affected recruitment and, therefore, school culture, one teacher noted. The social justice messaging and environmental language used no longer attracts the same type of high-level student as the college-preparatory language did, he speculated, affecting academics and test scores. Another major shift in school culture was the transition to restorative justice over disciplinary practices such as suspensions. Restorative justice attempts to reconcile offenders with their victims and the community as a whole, focusing on accountability and amends rather than discipline and punishment. Students, and faculty in retrospect, felt a lack of clarity around restorative justice, concluding that changing the disciplinary system is confusing for students, and that there needed to be stronger restorative justice practices and expectations integrated from the start. Despite these concerns, however, one teacher summed up how most of the faculty seemed to feel: “I think we have to be a social justice school. I don’t think there’s any other way to be a relevant citizen today, but there are only so many hours in a day and the social justice curriculum has been at the expense of some other things.”⁸²

⁸¹ Teacher 1.

⁸² Teacher 1.

3. Ongoing Tension with Academic Standards

Common Ground's values and justice-oriented mission has sometimes been at the expense of academic standards, and vice versa. The three shifts in Common Ground's history have ebbed and flowed between maintaining their identity as an environmental school and their academics, and faculty have striven for a balance between the two. Ideally, all grade level teachers would align reading, writing and problem solving skills vertically and horizontally in a relevant and engaging way that is connected to questions of environmental and social justice, and rooted in the site, their urban environment, and their students' lived experiences; however, striking this balance successfully takes an unbelievable amount of energy, and certain pieces can easily get ignored. Multiple metrics exist to evaluate academic success, including standardized tests like the SAT, MAP growth tests (Measures of Academic Progress), graduation rates, and college matriculation rates. The Connecticut State Department of Education uses School Performance Index (SPI) to measure the average performance of all students in a subject area on the state summative assessments from zero to 100.⁸³ In the 2018-2019 academic year, Common Ground scored 43.4 in English Language Arts (ELA), 38.3 in math, and 42.5 in science, while the Connecticut target is 75.⁸⁴ Though Common Ground's SAT scores are usually significantly stronger than the rest of the district's, they suffered a huge decline in 2018-2019, unfortunately just in time for their charter renewal assessment.

Despite the test score decrease, the representatives from the State Department of Education who reviewed Common Ground's case recommended a three-year charter renewal

⁸³ Connecticut State Department of Education, "School Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2017-2018."

⁸⁴ Ibid.

with a corrective action plan for academic achievement in the spring of 2020. In an email to the Common Ground faculty updating them of this news, the School Director, Liz Cox, wrote that the representatives were pleased with Common Ground’s work and mission, and were impressed by the SAT corrective action plan already in place.⁸⁵ Moreover, this dip in test scores actually proved very significant for Common Ground because that specific group of test-takers were the last ones to take the test before the integrated core curriculum. Though the core curriculum had already been in place at the time of this test, the rising seniors who took the test that year “didn’t get the benefit of these improvements” because it started during their junior years.⁸⁶ The core curriculum would be “more relevant, challenging and responsive” to students than what this group of rising seniors experienced, with an emphasis on reading, writing and problem-solving skills.⁸⁷ They anticipate higher scores in the upcoming years with students who have been through the streamlined curriculum, confirming the success of the core curriculum.

This statewide threshold for academic achievement proves exhausting for teachers, however, as Common Ground’s ethos is working with students at their level and providing alternative ways to see the world, which standardized testing does not. “It’s really hard to force the level of reading and writing they want across all disciplines with a lot of kids that are lower skilled or part of the achievement gap,” a teacher complained, feeling like the school might have to change its identity and student body to achieve test scores.⁸⁸ Another faculty member agreed, explaining that “The oxygen in the room gets sucked up by the vertical and horizontal alignment [of academic standards]. It feels like the capacity for professional learning and energy that we

⁸⁵ Email from principal, Liz Cox: “SDE Renewal Recommendation.” 28 Feb. 2020.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Peak, Christopher. “SAT Scores Slump.” *New Haven Independent*, New Haven Independent, 6 Aug. 2019, www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/sat_scores_slump/.

⁸⁸ Teacher 1.

were putting into building our shared understanding of social justice education and antiracism and anti-oppression has shifted over to standards and SAT alignment.”⁸⁹ While they recognized the need to have these standards in place, some faculty members did feel like it took priority over their environmental mission, compromising their identity. “We are not spending professional development, training, time, money, resources on deepening our environmental curriculum knowledge [or] putting those environmental themes or principles into courses,” a teacher explained. “We are spending a tremendous amount of time on literacy skills, tracking, collecting data, reviewing that data, developing new kinds of tests to measure it better, aligning those to national tests that we hate, but we have to use. Almost all of our effort is in that direction, almost no effort is into environmental content,” he concluded.⁹⁰

The faculty generally agreed that, while frustrating to keep reporting to the state, they need standards and data to stay on track. Without data-driven decisions, teachers noted, it could be easy for courses to derail, or for students, or teachers, to become complacent. “We want to make sure the decisions we're making about how we're teaching our kids are based in data, and it allows teachers time to work together to unify behind this strategy as well,” a data-driven teacher reflected. “It's very powerful when you're able to identify a skill for integrating text evidence and they're going to see it in all of their 9th grade classes. It just reinforces it and it sticks to kids a little bit better. The data is really only there to make sure that we're making informed decisions in the classroom because otherwise, with anecdotal information or experience, which is also valuable, it's easy to make a wrong turn.”⁹¹ Data tracks student performance, as well as what strategies and techniques are working for teachers in the classroom and across classes. Every

⁸⁹ Administrator 3.

⁹⁰ Teacher 2.

⁹¹ Teacher 4.

faculty member noted the need for reading, writing and problem-solving skills both for college readiness and the real world, and wanted to help students achieve that. More than anything, teachers appreciated the importance of the work Common Ground was doing beyond academics and recognized the need for them to stay open to achieve their mission. “Without test performance, we will no longer be a school,” one teacher conceded, “or at least it won't be an environmental high school anymore. It'll be shut down and redeveloped and that happens all over the state, all the time. So either we do test performance or we die. That's the nature of the beast.”⁹²

Staying open and continuing to serve students as best they can is part of Common Ground's environmental mission. “The greatest benefit that a school can provide to the environment is to churn out highly educated students who can read, write and problem solve,” a teacher reflected. “Serve these students, get them a quality education, that is environmental justice, and that is what can swing a neighborhood, a city, a state toward the environmental justice principles and themes and everything that we want to embody. That's what it means to create people who are going to excel in this society and in this world, that is environmental justice.”⁹³ Faculty, therefore, has searched for ways to integrate environmental justice with high academic standards. “To say that you're not data driven at this point in teaching seems negligent,” a faculty member expressed. “But to say that you only make decisions based on data is not really teaching—that's like being a machine.”⁹⁴

Recently, Common Ground has explicitly addressed its low test scores with corrective action plans to bring SAT practice into its core classes, therefore keeping environmental

⁹² Teacher 2.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Administrator 2.

curriculum active. For example, reading an article about organic farming practices in the “Food and the Environment” class and answering SAT-like reading comprehension questions. Faculty have realized the opportunity to craft the background knowledge of environmentalism and continue developing that curriculum, while making sure the literacy and problem-solving pieces are in place first. Teachers have been writing versions of SAT questions based on their class’ content: basic multiple-choice questions identifying the structure of a sentence or reading comprehension about a relevant article. “It’s frustrating for teachers to be spending their time writing SAT questions,” a faculty member admitted, “but the reality is that the more practice you get with that type of question, the better scores are.”⁹⁵ Teachers are not necessarily teaching to the test—they are still teaching their own environmental content—but they are addressing the tension between the SAT support needed and the core curriculum as best they can. “Everything I teach them can be applied through life, through every other class. None of it is wasted. The public school system is broken, but it’s what we have, and I think testing is more valuable than not,” a teacher concluded.⁹⁶

They have also integrated explicit SAT preparation into the 11th grade core junior seminar. A mandatory course for all juniors, even those who may not be going to college, junior seminar requires students to practice SAT questions and learn strategies to help with the school’s test scores. Students reported frustrations about the course. First, for students who are not planning on going to college, the course can seem like a waste of time, and a faculty member reported that some of these students might not take the material seriously and derail the class as a whole. Other students who did want to be in the class and who were doing well with the SAT

⁹⁵ Teacher 4.

⁹⁶ Teacher 1.

practice were also frustrated because they found the course to be disorganized and boring. These were students who explained that they came to Common Ground because of its high academic standards compared to other public schools in the area and for the college readiness language they heard advertised. The teachers care more about student success, they said. This course, however, did not feel like that to them. Current seniors who were the guinea pigs of the course, vented frustrations that the course only gave them practice SAT packets, without much guidance, and that the teacher gave the struggling or disinterested students incentives to stay on track, while they, students who were already on track, got none. Juniors, however, said this course was getting better now that the previous teacher was gone and they were actually learning strategies.⁹⁷

Overall, faculty do want student success. They want to make sure the curriculum is relevant, as well as rigorous. They recognize standardized testing raises questions about sorting and social and environmental justice. Instead of being angry at the state or shying away from that contradiction, they bring questions of educational justice into their core curriculum, and see helping all their students achieve these academic thresholds as part of their environmental mission. “If [students] are able to take that skill and bring it into a deeper learning of deciding an author’s intention and identifying the bias, I think that’s smart, social justice-oriented work,” a teacher proposed, optimistically.⁹⁸ Achieving academic standards is a component of their environmental and social justice work, and a major part of doing what is best for students. “We’re walking an interesting line between doing things the same and doing things differently. We don’t want to lose the benefits of a traditional education—the reading, writing and problem-

⁹⁷ Paragraph summarized from student forum.

⁹⁸ Teacher 4.

solving features of school that need to be in place,” a social studies teacher reflected. “But on the other hand, we push teachers really hard to do things differently, to do more than what happens at other schools, and that makes us great. That makes us more passionate, more engaged, more relevant, more authentic than many of the schools around us.”⁹⁹

4. Constraints and Considerations

Idealistic though Common Ground is, the school faces notable constraints to achieving its full goals. Many faculty members acknowledged wishing they could provide even more alternative learning opportunities for students, especially those who need extra support or extra time to graduate, and/or for those who are not going to college. Reflecting upon what he would do differently at the school, one faculty member said, “I would really build some alternative education structures for students who need that in order to hook them into the school, build trust in the school, want to be here for the mission before we toss them back into really challenging, rigorous traditional classroom classes.”¹⁰⁰ More experiential opportunities, like learning labs in which students could have classes in the mornings and then field experiences in the afternoons, more outdoor experience, and generally more flexibility for students who need it, faculty members suggested, would be great to incorporate into the school’s vision. Teachers also wondered how to encourage students to keep building their academic skills and become good problem-solvers in the world even when they are not pursuing higher education. They encourage students to be advocates for themselves, their environments, and sustainable change, regardless of their college aspirations. Real-life experiences, vocational training, and flexibility and support

⁹⁹ Teacher 2.

¹⁰⁰ Teacher 2.

were areas faculty wanted to improve, but the state measures school success by the percentage of students matriculating in college, and vocational students or students who need more time to graduate work against them.

The school has also been increasing in size over the past few years, requiring renovations and new buildings, and fundamentally changing the small-community environment. While Common Ground is still small, junior and senior students reflected that the increase in student body has deteriorated the quality of relationships between students since they arrived at the school only a few years earlier. With the growing population, space, funding, and support staff have been especially important, proving to be major constraints for the school. Moreover, student health, poverty and special needs are pervasive issues in the community that create need for more resources from the school, and limit student and family capacity. Faculty noted professional capacity as another constraint. Public schools have high teacher burnout to begin with, but a charter school, and one with such a dedication to its students, is exhausting and highly demanding of its faculty. Finally, one teacher concluded wishing Common Ground had more time and opportunity to develop a shared adult understanding of environmental justice schooling, familiarity with relevant texts and literature, and other resources.¹⁰¹ One teacher, however, addressed the major issue of not having enough space for all the classes or activities within the buildings, noting, “We're not looking at the obvious answer, which is just go outside. We have this amazing site. Why don't we leave the high school and use the site?”¹⁰² One faculty member summed up Common Ground's aspirations and limitations: “I feel like Common Ground's heart and mind are in a really amazing, strong place, and sometimes its feet aren't able to catch up to

¹⁰¹ Administrator 3.

¹⁰² Teacher 2.

what its goals are, which is a realistic problem when you're dealing with progressive issues in a traditional system.”¹⁰³

V. Conclusion

Common Ground has taken on the unique challenge of teaching diverse students about the environment using place-based learning in a public, urban setting. The Common Ground case study sits at the intersection of the fields of environmental education, diversity in environmentalism, place-based learning, culturally-responsive environmental pedagogy, and the Connecticut State Department of Education academic standards. While academic literature exists in each of these fields, very few real-life implementations exist at this nexus. Common Ground could serve as a model for other similar schools, and this project could provide general guidelines for how to do so. The environmental movement needs as many passionate participants as possible and requires diversity to understand the needs of the various populations affected by climate change (i.e. everyone) and to bring creativity and innovation to climate change efforts. Culturally-responsive environmental pedagogies that allow students to form meaningful connections with their environments through place-based learning will foster environmental stewardship at a young age and can help to create the passionate leaders this world needs to survive.

Every person I interviewed, student or faculty, was touched by the relevance, immediacy and thoughtfulness of Common Ground’s justice-oriented and place-based content, myself included. On the evening of October 10, 2019, I filed into a large auditorium at Wilbur Cross High School in New Haven, where Common Ground’s charter renewal hearing would take place.

¹⁰³ Administrator 2.

I was surrounded by students, alums, teachers, staff, families, local business owners, education experts, and community members, all of whom stood up to speak eloquently about the impact Common Ground has had on their lives, their children's lives, their city, their environment. I was far from the only person moved in that room listening to peoples' stories, as their charter was later approved to continue inspiring the community for three more years. Though Common Ground is still evolving and imperfect, the passion and care taken to serve its community has made a tremendous impact on its students, faculty and community. This school is a model for a progressive, equitable, though imperfect, kind of teaching that can enact change. It has changed teachers, developed students, created community, and is one of the more hopeful ways we have of changing the world piece by piece.

VI. Appendix

A. Faculty Recruitment Email Script

Dear x,

My name is Alex and I am a senior at Yale University and have also been the Public School Intern for Common Ground for almost two years. I am an Environmental Studies major and am in the Education Studies program, and for my senior capstone project I am investigating how Common Ground's curriculum has changed since the school's conception and how the mission has adapted over the years. I hope to talk to teachers, administrators and students at Common Ground who have been involved in the curriculum-building process to hear piece together a history of Common Ground and understand the values and processes that have led to how the school is today.

Having participated in environmental education myself, studied environment and education academically, and worked at Common Ground for almost two years, this topic is close to my heart and I hope it may contribute to greater knowledge about environmental justice education. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview you for my research. An interview will last about one hour and will take place at Common Ground or, if necessary, over the phone or via video call.

Please contact me with your response, questions or concerns at alexandra.weyerhaeuser@yale.edu or at (617) 840-5516. In 1-2 weeks, if I have not otherwise received a message from you, I will follow up to ensure that my communication has reached you successfully.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Alex Weyerhaeuser

B. Teacher/ Faculty Interview Questions

1. Tell me about how you came to work at Common Ground
 - When you arrived, subject taught
 - Where were you before?
 - Reasons for choice
 - Importance of environmental education/farm in choice
2. What did the high school curriculum (for your subject) look like when you arrived?
 - Who designed the curriculum?
 - Teacher collaboration or doing it on their own
 - Student involvement
 - Inclusion of environmental education, if at all
 - (How) has it changed?
 - When were APs added?
3. Have you seen a tension between the environmental focus and the academic standards?
 - If so, can you tell me about a time this was really clear to you?
 - Time in class vs. outdoors
 - Freedom in designing curriculum
 - Test-taking strategies, focus on data with colleagues
 - Pressure from administrators
 - How is this an area of growth and what still needs to happen?
4. What does it mean that the school has a focus on social justice?
 - How did that evolve?
 - Teacher background
 - Teacher training/common readings
 - Students served
 - How is this an area of growth and what still needs to happen?

5. If there were no constraints, what would you like to see Common Ground do in the future?

-What are the constraints?

6. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to tell me about?

7. Census questions for diversity of interviewees

-How would you identify your race/ethnicity on a census document

-Gender identity

-First generation college

C. Student Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about how you came to Common Ground

-When you arrived

-Where were you before?

-Reasons for choice

-Importance of environmental education/farm in choice

2. Tell me about the curriculum-building process

-What does it look like

-How involved have you been?

3. Tell me about what you understand of Common Ground's mission and values and what these mean to you

-Environmental focus

-Social justice focus

-Academic focus

-Any changes since you've gotten here?

4. Have you seen a tension between the environmental focus and the academic standards?

-Time in class vs. outdoors

-Test-taking strategies

-Pressure from faculty

5. Tell me about how you've changed since coming to Common Ground

-Academically (& preparation for testing)

- Care for environmental issues
 - Care for social justice issues
 - Confidence/empowerment
6. How do you feel about the Common Ground community?
 - Do you feel welcome?
 - Faculty
 - Other students
 - POWER standards
 - Guidance
 - All-school activities
 7. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to tell me about?
 8. Census questions for diversity of interviewees
 - How would you identify your race/ethnicity on a census document
 - Gender identity
 - Has anyone in family gone to college?

D. Frameworks Rubric

PERFORMANCE STANDARD #1: SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

1. a. – f. Academic Achievement (all students, high-needs subgroup)	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
<p>Subject Performance Index (0-100) in ELA, Math and Science</p> <p>This indicator will produce performance indices for English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA), Mathematics and Science based on results from the Smarter Balanced assessments for Grades 3-8, SAT for Grade 11, the Connecticut Alternate Assessments (CTAA) in all available tested grades (i.e., 3 through 8 and 11), the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) Standard Assessment in Grades 5, 8, and 11, and the Connecticut Alternate Science Assessment (CTAS) also in Grades 5, 8, and 11.</p> <p>Index scores will be calculated based on scale scores rather than achievement levels. Scale scores will be converted to an appropriate index point value ranging from 0 to 110 at the student level. For example, in the Smarter Balanced assessment, level 3 of 4 is considered on-track for college and career readiness while level 4 is an explicit standard that truly represents an “advanced” level of performance. This approach would allow schools with students performing in the highest level on the assessment to earn more than 100 points toward the school’s subject performance index score.</p> <p>All Students High Needs</p> <p>A district/school is identified as having an achievement gap if the size of its index score gap between the <i>High Needs subgroup</i> and the <i>Non-High Needs group</i> (or the ultimate achievement target of 75 if that’s lower) is a significant outlier i.e., at least one standard deviation greater than the statewide gap in any subject area.</p>	Possible points: ___/300	Possible points: ___/300	Possible points: ___/300	Possible points: ___/800
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Academic Achievement Data				

1.2. a-f. Academic Growth (all students, high-needs subgroup)	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
<p>Average Percentage of Growth Target Achieved for students in Grades 4 through 8 (½ SB (Smarter Balanced) - ELA (English Language Arts); ½ SB-Math).</p> <p>All Students High Needs</p> <p>The Smarter Balanced (SB) Assessment in English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA) and Mathematics is used for measuring student academic growth. Every student’s score earned in the prior year serves as a starting point or baseline score against which growth is measured. In both subjects, the test scores are vertically scaled across grades and facilitate tracking student growth within the same subject across grades, despite differences in test content and difficulty.</p> <p>Growth toward English Language Proficiency (Average Percentage of Target Achieved) for all English learners (½ LAS Links Oral; ½ LAS Links Literacy).</p> <p>The LAS Links, administered annually to all English learners, is used to measure Growth Toward English Language Proficiency. A student’s LAS Links scores from spring of the prior school year are used as a baseline and to establish a Literacy growth target and an Oral growth target. The student’s change in vertical scale score in each composite area in the next school year is compared to the student’s targets. The percentage of target achieved is determined for each composite area (negative growth is reported as 0; students are capped at 110% of target achieved). At the school-level, the percentage of target achieved is averaged across English learners to report the Average Percentage of Target Achieved for the school for Literacy and Oral. These values are included as part of Indicator 2 in the accountability system.</p>	Possible points: ___/400	Possible points: ___/400	Possible points: ___/400	Possible points: ___/0
	Growth toward ELP - Literacy ___/50			
	Growth toward ELP - Oral ___/50			
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Academic Achievement Data (longitudinal)				

1.3. Participation Rates for ELA, Math, and Science (all students, high-needs subgroup)	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
There are not points associated with this indicator. Participation rates below 95 percent will require a change in school category for schools earning enough points to be Category 1 or 2.	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:
All Students High Needs	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Participation rates impact school classification. The expectation is that every school will have at least a 95 percent participation rate for all students and high needs students in mathematics, ELA, and Science. Failure to meet those standards will result in a school being classified into a lower level.				
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Testing participation rate				

1.4. Attendance/Chronic Absenteeism (all students, high-needs subgroup)	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
The CSDE's expectation is that no district/school will have a chronic absenteeism rate that is greater than 5 percent; therefore, full points will be awarded if the chronic absenteeism rate is 5 percent or lower. Conversely, no points will be awarded if the chronic absenteeism rate is 30 percent or greater. To recognize incremental improvement in the reduction of chronic absenteeism, rates between 30 percent and 5 percent will be awarded proportional points.	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:
All Students High Needs	___/100	___/100	___/100	___/100
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Attendance, chronic absenteeism data				

1.5. Preparation for College and Career Readiness - Courses	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
Points based on the percentage of Grade 11 and 12 students participating in at least one of the following during high school:	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two courses in AP (Advanced Placement)/IB (International Baccalaureate)/dual enrollment; or Two courses in one of seventeen CTE (Career and Technical Education) categories; or Two workplace experience "courses" in any area. 	___/0	___/0	___/50	___/50
Points will be prorated based on the percentage of the ultimate target achieved. The ultimate target is 75%.				
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Preparation for postsecondary and career readiness--coursework				

1.6. Preparation for College and Career Readiness - Exams	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
<p>This metric evaluates whether students in Grade 11 and 12 have attained benchmark scores on at least one of the most prevalent college/career readiness exams.</p> <p>Points are awarded based on the percentage of Grade 11 and 12 students who meet at least one of the following benchmark scores on the respective exams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SAT (effective March 2016) – Evidence-Based Reading and Writing score of at least 480 and a Math score of at least 530 on the Redesigned SAT; or ACT – meeting benchmark on 3 of 4 exams (English=18, Reading=22, Math=22, Science=23); or AP – 3 or higher on an AP exam; or IB – 4 or higher on an IB exam. <p>Points will be prorated based on the percentage of the ultimate target (75%) achieved.</p>	Possible points: ___/0	Possible points: ___/0	Possible points: ___/50	Possible points: ___/50
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Preparation for postsecondary and career readiness--exams				
1.7. Graduation–On track in Grade 9	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
<p>This indicator is based on The University of Chicago’s Consortium on Chicago School Research. In Connecticut’s system, points will be earned based on the percentage of 9th graders earning at least five full-year credits in the year. Maximum points are earned when the school reaches 94 percent on this indicator.</p>	Possible points: ___/0	Possible points: ___/50	Possible points: ___/50	Possible points: ___/50
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Graduation-on-track in Grade 9				
1.8. Four Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (all students)	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
<p>Percentage of first time 9th graders who graduate with a regular high school diploma in four years or less – All Students. Maximum points are earned when the school reaches 94 percent on this indicator.</p>	Possible points: ___/0	Possible points: ___/0	Possible points: ___/100	Possible points: ___/100
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Four year graduation rate				
1.9. Six Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (high-needs subgroup)	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
<p>Percentage of first time 9th graders who graduate with a regular high school diploma in six years or less – High Needs</p> <p>Percentage of the ultimate target (94 percent) achieved by students in the High Needs Subgroup</p> <p>Measuring the Graduation Rate Gap: A district/school is identified as having a graduation rate gap if the size of its six-year graduation rate gap between the High Needs subgroup and the Non-High Needs group (or 94% if that’s lower) is at least one standard deviation greater than the statewide gap.</p>	Possible points: ___/0	Possible points: ___/0	Possible points: ___/100	Possible points: ___/100
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Six year graduation rate				

1.10. Postsecondary Entrance	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
Percentage of graduating class who enrolled in a two or four-year postsecondary institution any time during the first year after high school graduation. The ultimate target is 75 percent. The districts/schools can earn up to 100 points based on the pro-rated percentage of the ultimate target achieved.	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:
	___/0	___/0	___/100	___/100
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ Postsecondary enrollment				

1.11. Physical Fitness	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
Percentage of students meeting/exceeding the "Health Fitness Zone Standard" in all four areas of the CT Physical Fitness Assessment. Maximum points are earned when the school reaches 75 percent on this indicator. However, overall points on this measure are adjusted based on estimated participation rates.	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:
	___/50	___/50	___/50	___/50
The CT Physical Fitness Assessment information can be found here: https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Physical-Education/Physical-Education---Test-Administrators-Manual .				
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ CT physical fitness assessment				

1.12. Arts Access	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
Percentage of students in Grade 9 through 12 participating in at least one dance, theater, music, or visual arts course in the school year. Points will be prorated based on the percentage of the ultimate target achieved. Ultimate target is 60 percent.	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:	Possible points:
	___/0	___/0	___/50	___/50
Possible Evidence/Source of Data: ♦CT Accountability System ♦ High School student arts participation				

Indicators	Elementary	Middle	Middle/High	High
Total Possible Points	___/950	___/1,000	___/1,450	___/1,550

SCHOOL CLASSIFICATION

Category 1 = Meets. Category 1 is comprised of schools earning an accountability index from 85 to 100. The accountability index is the percentage of total possible points earned across all indicators. Schools with an achievement gap, a graduation rate gap, or a test participation rate less than 95 percent for either the All Students group or the High Needs group in any tested subject will be classified into the next lower category.

Category 2 = Meets. Category 2 is comprised of schools earning an accountability index from 70-84.9. The accountability index is the percentage of total possible points earned across all indicators. Schools with an achievement gap, a graduation rate gap, or a test participation rate less than 95 percent for either the All Students group or the High Needs group in any tested subject will be classified into the next lower category.

Category 3 = Pending Action. Category 3 is comprised of schools that have not been identified as a Turnaround or Focus School (Categories 4 and 5) but have earned an accountability index of 69.9 or lower. The accountability index is the percentage of total possible points earned across all indicators.

Category 4 and 5 (New and existing Turnaround and Focus Schools) Turnaround schools are among the lowest performing five percent of schools in Connecticut based on a three-year average of the accountability index. In addition, schools with six-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for all students that are less than 70 percent in each of the three most recent cohorts will also be identified as Turnaround. Focus schools are a group of schools identified in different ways depending on whether growth data are available. Schools with growth results on the Smarter Balanced growth model will be identified as a Focus school when the school is in the bottom 10 percent of schools statewide based on the average percentage of target achieved (Indicator 2) by high needs students in ELA or mathematics in each of the prior three years. For schools without growth data, schools in the bottom 10 percent of all schools statewide based on the performance index for high needs students in ELA or mathematics (Indicator 1) in each of the prior three years will be identified as a Focus school. Additionally, any high school with a six-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for the high needs group that is less than 70 percent in each of the three most recent cohorts will be identified as a focus school.

PERFORMANCE STANDARD #2: STEWARDSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND MANAGEMENT

2.1. Financial Management		
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:	
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to financial management and oversight expectations as evidenced by an annual independent audit, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An audit devoid of significant findings and conditions, material weaknesses, or significant internal control weakness. An audit that does not include a going concern disclosure in the notes or an explanatory paragraph within the audit report. 	
Pending Action	<p>The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.</p>	
Does Not Meet	<p>The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.</p>	
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews and focus groups Financial data and audits Board policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budget and accounting materials Renewal Application question 10

2.2. Financial Reporting and Compliance		
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:	
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to financial reporting and compliance requirements (e.g., submits reports on time or within a reasonable grace period), including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete on-time submission of certified audit statement of all revenues from public and private sources and expenditures, most recently completed Internal Revenue Service form 990. Complete and on-time submission of annual budget and revised budgets (if applicable). Appropriate financial controls (e.g., internal control procedures for cash receipts, cash disbursements, and purchases). On-time submission and completion of the annual independent audit and corrective action plans, if applicable. The public school budget and accounting requirements. Annual inventory of current assets. Prohibition of transfer of state and federal funds. Regulations CT State Agencies § 10-66mm-4 Appropriate accounting of costs and related party transaction. Regulations CT State Agencies § 10-66mm-5. 	
Pending Action	<p>The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.</p>	
Does Not Meet	<p>The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.</p>	
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews and focus groups Financial data and audits Board policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budget and accounting materials IRS Form 990 Renewal Application question 10

2.3. Financial Viability		
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:	
Meets	<p>The school demonstrates strong short and long-term fiscal viability is evidenced by ability to meet enrollment projections; reasonability and certainty of revenue projections and funding sources; margins and cash flow; and debt levels. Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current ratio (current assets divided by current liabilities) is greater than or equal to 1.1; or current ratio is between 1.0 and 1.1 <i>and</i> one-year trend is positive (current-year ratio is higher than last year's). <i>Note: For schools in their first or second year of operation, the current ratio must be greater than or equal to 1.1.</i> • 60 unrestricted days of cash (unrestricted cash divided by ((total expenses minus depreciation expenses)/365 days)); or between 30 and 60 Days Cash <i>and</i> one-year trend is positive. <i>Note: For schools in their first or second year of operation, they must have a minimum of 30 days cash.</i> • School is not in default of loan covenant(s) and/or is not delinquent with debt service. • Aggregated 3-year total margin (total 3-year net income divided by total 3-year revenues) is positive <i>and</i> the most recent year total margin is positive; or aggregated 3-year total margin is greater than -1.5 percent, the trend is positive for the last 2 years <i>and</i> the most recent year total margin is positive. <i>Note: For schools in their first or second year of operation, the cumulative total margin must be positive.</i> • Debt-to-asset ratio (total liabilities divided by total assets) is less than 0.90. • Multi-year cumulative cash flow (multi-year cash flow = year 3 total cash minus year 1 total cash; one-year cash flow = year 2 total cash minus year 1 total cash) is positive <i>and</i> cash flow is positive each year; or multi-year and most recent year cash flows are positive; or one-year cash flow is positive (schools in their second year of operation). <i>Note: This measure is not applicable for schools until their second year of operations. The multi-year cash flow calculation is not applicable until a school's third year of operations.</i> • Debt service coverage ratio (net income + depreciation + interest expense)/(annual principle, interest, and lease payments) is equal to or exceeds 1.1. 	
Pending Action	<p>The financial analysis uncovers any of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current ratio is between 1.0 and 1.1 <i>and</i> one-year trend is negative; or current ratio is less than or equal to 1.0. • Unrestricted days cash is between 30 and 60 days <i>and</i> one-year trend is negative; or days cash is below 30 days. • School is in default of loan covenant(s) and/or is delinquent with debt service. • Aggregated 3-year total margin is greater than -1.5 percent, but trend does not meet standard; or aggregated 3-year total margin is less than or equal to -1.5 percent; or the most recent year Total Margin is less than -10 percent. • Debt-to-asset ratio is greater than or equal to .90. • Multi-year cumulative cash flow is positive, but trend does not meet standard; or multi-year cumulative cash flow is negative. • Debt service coverage ratio is less than 1.1. 	
Does Not Meet	<p>Fiscal viability is not achieved due to serious concerns regarding: ability to meet enrollment projections; reasonability and certainty of revenue projections and funding sources; margins and cash flow; and/or debt levels. Upon further review following a preliminary "Pending Action" rating, CSDE identifies (a) a moderate financial risk such that heightened monitoring and/or intervention may be warranted; or (b) significant financial risk and has concerns about financial viability such that heightened monitoring and/or intervention are necessary.</p>	
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • Financial data and audits • Annual Report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget and accounting materials • Renewal Application questions 9 and 11

2.4. Governance and Management		
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:	
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to governance by its board, (C.G.S.A. § 10-66bb(g)(2), (h)(2) et seq.), including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership. C.G.S.A. § 10-66kk(b), C.G.S.A. § 10-66mm, Regulations CT State Agencies § 10-66mm-3. • Board policies, including those related to oversight of a Charter Management Organization (CMO), if applicable. • If contracting with a CMO for whole school management services, the contract shall include, but need not be limited to C.G.S.A. § 10-66tt. • If contracting with a CMO for whole school management services, the contract shall include the provisions of C.G.S.A. § 10-66uu. • Board bylaws. • Open meetings laws. C.G.S.A. § 10-66kk(a) • Maintenance of public records. C.G.S.A. § 10-66aa(1)(C) • Policy including conflicts of interest, anti-nepotism aligned to guidelines provided in Appendix E, and background checks. C.G.S.A. § 10-66oo and C.G.S.A. § 10-66rr respectively • Board composition and/or membership rules. C.G.S.A. § 10-66aa(1)(D) • Each member of the Board shall complete training related to charter school governing council responsibilities and best practices at least once during the term of the charter, C.G.S.A. § 10-66oo • Appropriate managerial procedures (e.g., a checking account, adequate payroll procedures, and an organizational chart). • If the applicable CMO Board Members shall submit to records checks, C.G.S.A. § 10-66rr. • Board evidence of initiated substantive communication with the local or regional board of education of the town in which the state or local charter school is located to share student learning practices and experiences C.G.S.A. § 10-66bb(g). <p>The governing board materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules, regulations, and provisions of the charter contract relating to oversight of the school management team, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (For schools contracting with charter management organizations [CMOs]) the school governing board is maintaining authority over management, holding it accountable for performance as agreed under a written performance agreement, and requiring annual financial reports of the CMO. • (For all schools) the school governing board's willingness and skill in identifying issues with the school management team, taking corrective action, and implementing any corrective actions imposed by the authorizer. C.G.S.A. § 10-66bb(g)(2), (h)(2) effective leadership and oversight of school operations, funds expended prudently and properly. 	
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.	
Does Not Meet	The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.	
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • Board policies and procedures • School Web site • CMO contract, if applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board membership, • Board member background checks and training • CMO background checks, if applicable
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corrective action • Renewal Application questions 10 and 11

2.5. School Facility		
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:	
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to the school facilities, grounds, and transportation, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation. C.G.S.A. § 10-66ee(f) • Viable certificate of occupancy or other required building use authorization. • Health code, safety code, and fire code requirements. • Maintaining and documenting requisite insurance coverage. 	
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.	
Does Not Meet	The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.	
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School tour • Facility lease 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insurance coverage

PERFORMANCE STANDARD #3: STUDENT POPULATION

3.1. Recruitment and Enrollment Process	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to relevant to student populations, including but not limited to C.G.S.A. § 10-66bb(d)(8), (g)(4), (h)(1)(C), (j)(1)(2), and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fair and equitable enrollment and recruitment processes (e.g., admissions, lottery, and waiting lists). Transparent and open access.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school fails to establish policies or implement practices for fair and equitable recruitment and enrollment (e.g., admissions, lottery, and waiting lists).
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews and focus groups Student waitlist, enrollment and demographic information Renewal Application question 14

3.2. Waitlist and Enrollment Data	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	The school's enrollment variance equals or exceeds 95 percent in the most recent year. A sizable annual waitlist may provide further evidence of strong demand for the school.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school demonstrates the inability to meet enrollment projections and approved seat allocations, and/or inconsistent enrollment patterns emerge.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student waitlist and enrollment data Renewal Application question 16

3.3. Demographic Representation	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	The student body reflects the demographics of the target population and/or surrounding communities. There is strong evidence of efforts to attract, enroll, and retain special populations.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The student body does not reflect the demographics of the target population and/or surrounding communities. Minimal evidence of efforts to attract, enroll, and retain special populations.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student demographic information Renewal Application questions 12 and 14

3.4. Family and Community Support	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	The school maintains strong parent satisfaction and community support. Offers frequent and meaningful opportunities for family and community involvement.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school maintains low parent satisfaction and limited community support. Offers weak and/or infrequent efforts to engage the family and community.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • Public hearing testimony • Superintendent comments • Renewal Application question 16

3.5. School Culture and Climate	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	The school maintains clear policies and consistent implementation of policies. Ongoing behavior intervention monitoring, low frequency of suspensions and/or expulsions.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and procedures. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address behavior management in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school fails to maintain policies or implement policies. High frequency suspension and/or expulsion rate. The school's suspension and/or expulsion rate raise concerns which require immediate attention and intervention.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • School tour and classroom observations • School culture and climate data • Renewal Application question 6

PERFORMANCE STANDARD #4: LEGAL COMPLIANCE

4.1. Open Meetings and Information Management	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to the maintaining and handling of information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Governing Board meetings are open and accessible to the public. • Compliance with requirements to post on the Internet the schedule, agenda, and minutes of each Governing Board meeting, including any meeting of a subcommittee of the Governing Board C.G.S.A. § 10-66kk. • Proper and secure maintenance of education records and Regulations CT State Agencies § 10-4-9, 10. • Compliance with Public Records Act. C.G.S.A. § 10-66aa (1) (C) . • Appropriate handling of information. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), 20 U.S.C. 1232(g). • Transferring of student records. • Proper and secure maintenance of testing material.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. The school is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • Board policies and procedures • Board minutes, schedules and agendas • School Web site

4.2. Students with Disabilities	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	<p>Consistent with a state charter school's status as a Local Education Agency (LEA), the school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, (including but not limited to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, C.G.S.A. § 10-66ee(d)(3), and the school's policies and procedures governing the education of students with disabilities) relating to the education of students with identified disabilities and those suspected of having a disability. A state charter school is a Local Education Agency (LEA), except that state law designates the LEA of the child's residence responsible for the identification of student eligibility for special education services and determination of the special education services to be provided, pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to students attending a charter school. Areas for compliance include but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to enroll. • Referral to the student's district of residence when a student's academic performance, attendance, or behavior is unacceptable or marginally acceptable so the district of residence can convene a Planning and Placement Team (PPT) to consider the student's need for special education. • Participation in the Planning and Placement Team process and implementation of Individualized Education Program (IEPs) developed by the student's district of residence. • Operational compliance, including provision of services in the least restrictive environment and appropriate inclusion in the school's academic program, assessments (with appropriate accommodations), and extracurricular activities. • Discipline, including due process protections, manifestation determinations, and behavioral intervention plans. • Referral, identification, development and implementation of a plan under Section 504. • Access to the school's facility and program to students in a lawful manner and consistent with students' IEPs or Section 504 plans. • Appropriate use of all available, applicable funding. • Reporting to the state and to parents on the use of physical restraint and/or seclusion. Training staff.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. The school is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • Classroom observations • Board policies and procedures • IEP/Special Education file review • SRBI process • Renewal Application question 7

4.3. English Learners			
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:		
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, (including but not limited to Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), U.S. Department of Education authorities, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA)) relating to requirements regarding English Learners (ELs) and C.G.S.A. § 10-17a-j. Areas for compliance include but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required policies related to steps for identification of students in need of EL services. • Required policies related to the provision of services of EL students. • Compliance with native-language communication requirements. • Appropriate and equitable delivery of services to identified students. • Appropriate accommodations on assessments. • Exiting of students from EL services. • Ongoing monitoring of exited students. 		
Pending Action	<p>The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. Is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.</p>		
Does Not Meet	<p>The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.</p>		
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • Classroom observations • Copy of Bilingual Annual Evaluation Report, if applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School policies and procedures • IEP/Special Education file review • Copy of Title III Annual Evaluation Report, if applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SRBI Process • Renewal Application question 7

4.4. Rights of Students			
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:		
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations relating to the rights of students, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate handling of student information that could be used in discriminatory ways or otherwise contrary to law. FERPA, 20 U.S.C. 1232(g) • Due process protections, privacy, civil rights, and student liberties requirements, including First Amendment protections and the Establishment Clause restrictions prohibiting public schools from engaging in religious instruction. • State nondiscrimination laws C.G.S.A. § 10-15c. • Administration of student discipline (discipline hearings and suspension and expulsion policies and practices). <p>Note: <i>Proper handling of discipline processes for students with disabilities is addressed more specifically in 4.2.</i></p>		
Pending Action	<p>The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. The school is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.</p>		
Does Not Meet	<p>The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.</p>		
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups • Board policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student files • Renewal Application question 6 and 7 	

4.5. Educator and Staff Credentials; Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM); and Educator Evaluation and Support	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	<p>The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, relating to state certification requirements as modified by any waivers that have been granted. C.G.S.A. § 10-66dd, Regulations CT State Agencies § 10-145d-401, Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM) Program as per C.G.S.A. § 10-145o, and educator evaluation and support requirements as per C.G.S.A. § 10-151b. Areas for compliance include but are not limited to:</p> <p>Certification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of certification compliance for all staff requiring appropriate authorizations for position held. <p>Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comply with TEAM requirements as described in the TEAM Program Manual and TEAM Fact Sheet. <p>Educator Evaluation and Support Plan (EESP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of a CSDE-approved Educator Evaluation and Support Plan (EESP), aligned with the 2017 CT Guidelines for Educator Evaluation, with educators who require certification. Maintaining evaluation and support data.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. The school is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews and focus groups Board policies and procedures Completed Staff List, (Appendix G) Certification Documentation TEAM Dashboard, if a subscriber TEAM Program Status Update, (Appendix H) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three-Year TEAM District Support Plan (2019-2022) CSDE-approved Educator Evaluation and Support Plan Evaluation and Support documents
4.6. Employee Rights	
Evaluation Rating:	Rating Criteria:
Meets	The school materially complies with applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations, relating to employment considerations, including but not limited to the Family Medical Leave Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, employment contracts, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and other applicable laws. C.G.S.A. § 10-66dd.
Pending Action	The school requires minor modifications to its policies and/or practices. The school is taking satisfactory measures to remedy and address these issues in a timely manner.
Does Not Meet	The school failed to implement the program in the manner described above; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.
Possible Evidence/ Source of Data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews and focus groups Board policies and procedures

VII. Works Cited

Administrator 1, interviewed 5 Feb, 2020.

Administrator 2, interviewed 7 Feb, 2020.

Administrator 3, interviewed 13 Feb, 2020.

Administrator 4, interviewed 24 Feb, 2020.

Chawla, Louise, and Debra Flanders Cushing. "Education for Strategic Environmental

- Behavior.” *Environmental Education Research*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2007, pp. 437–452., doi:10.1080/13504620701581539.
- Common Ground High School, Urban Farm, and Environmental Education Center. “Common Ground Students Continue Academic Growth.” *Common Ground Press Release*, 13 Aug, 2020.
- Common Ground, “Mission, Values, Strategic Priorities, CEIO Outcomes,” 2009.
- Connecticut State Department of Education, “Connecticut’s Charter Schools: Best Practices Annual Report.” 2017-2018.
- Connecticut State Department of Education, “District Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2017-2018.”
- Connecticut State Department of Education, “School Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2017-2018.”
- Email from principal, Liz Cox: “SDE Renewal Recommendation.” 28 Feb. 2020.
- Euler, James S. "Developing an Outdoor Education Program for Public Schools. Fact Sheet." (1981). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED287655>.
- Floyd, Myron F., et al. “Ethnic Factors and the Use of Public Outdoor Recreation Areas: The Case of Mexican Americans.” *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1993, pp. 83–98., doi:10.1080/01490409309513190.
- “From The Ground Up: Stories From the People Who Built Common Ground.” Common Ground High School, Urban Farm, and Environmental Education Center, 2 June 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=439&v=JwK1LoLqE80&feature=emb_title.
- Goldenberg, Marni, and Dan Pronsolino. “A Means-End Investigation of Outcomes Associated with Outward Bound and NOLS Programs.” *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2008, pp. 271–276., doi:10.1177/105382590703000310.
- Gough, Noel. “Joy A. Palmer 1998, Environmental Education in the 21st Century: Theory, Practice, Progress and Promise, Routledge, London.” *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 15, 1999, pp. 165–166., doi:10.1017/s081406260000375x.
- Hammerman, William M. “Fifty Years of Resident Outdoor Education, 1930-1980: Its Impact on American Education.” *American Camping Association*, 1980, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED193004>.
- “History.” *Common Ground*, 10 Apr. 2017, <http://commongroundct.org/about/history/>.

Hungerford, Harold R., and Trudi L. Volk. "Changing Learner Behavior Through Environmental Education." *The Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1990, pp. 8–21., doi:10.1080/00958964.1990.10753743.

Joel Tolman, Director of Impact and Engagement's comments, 18 Apr, 2020.

Kelly, R. Memo to Liz Cox, Common Ground High School, New Haven, CT. 3 May 2019.

Knapp, Clifford E. "The 'I – Thou' Relationship, Place-Based Education, and Aldo Leopold." *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2005, pp. 277–285., doi:10.1177/105382590502700307.

Lieberman, Gerald A., and Linda L. Hoody. "Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning. Results of a Nationwide Study." (1998). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED428943>.

McInerney, Peter, et al. "'Coming to A Place Near You?' The Politics and Possibilities of a Critical Pedagogy of Place-Based Education." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2011, pp. 3–16., doi:10.1080/1359866x.2010.540894.

"Mission & Values." *Common Ground*, 10 Mar. 2019, www.commongroundct.org/about/.

Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press, 2014.

Neal, Philip, and Joy Palmer. "The Handbook of Environmental Education." Apr. 2003, doi:10.4324/9780203422021.

New Haven Ecology Project, Inc. "Common Ground Charter School Proposal: Executive Summary," 1997.

Paci, Sophie. "Outside the Walls: Exploring the Benefits of Outdoor-Based Learning for Children's Development." *Yale University*, 2016. <https://educationstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/SPaci%20Capstone%202016.pdf>

Park, Angela. "'Mission Critical: A new frame for diversity and environmental progress.'" *Diversity and the future of the environmental movement*. Emily Enderle, ed (2007): 35-49.

Peak, Christopher. "SAT Scores Slump." *New Haven Independent*, New Haven Independent, 6 Aug. 2019, www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/sat_scores_slump/.

Silveira, Stacy J. "The American Environmental Movement: Surviving through Diversity."

Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review, vol. 28, no. 2, 2001, pp. 497-532.,
https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/bcenv28&div=19&g_sent=1&cas_a_token=&collection=journals#.

Simms, Patrice Lumumba. "On Diversity and Public Policymaking: An Environmental Justice Perspective." *Sustainable Development Law & Policy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2012-2013, p. 14-19. *HeinOnline*, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/sdlp13&i=14>.

Smith, Gregory A. "Place-Based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are." *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 83, no. 8, 2002, pp. 584–594., doi:10.1177/003172170208300806.

Sobel, David. *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms & communities*. Orion Society, 2004.

Student Forum, 4 Mar, 2020.

Taylor, Dorceta. "Making Multicultural Environmental Education a Reality." *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, vol. 6, no.2/3, Winter/Spring 1996, pp.3-6.,
https://www.jstor.org/stable/41554237?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Teacher 1, interviewed 6 Feb, 2020.

Teacher 2, interviewed 6 Feb, 2020.

Teacher 3, interviewed 10 Feb, 2020.

Teacher 4, interviewed 13 Feb, 2020.

Warren, Karen. "A Call for Race, Gender, and Class Sensitive Facilitation in Outdoor Experiential Education." *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1998, pp. 21–25., doi:10.1177/105382599802100105.

Warren, Karen. "Preparing the Next Generation: Social Justice in Outdoor Leadership Education and Training." *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2002, pp. 231–238., doi:10.1177/105382590202500107.

Warren, Karen, et al. "Social Justice in Outdoor Experiential Education." *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2014, pp. 89–103., doi:10.1177/1053825913518898.