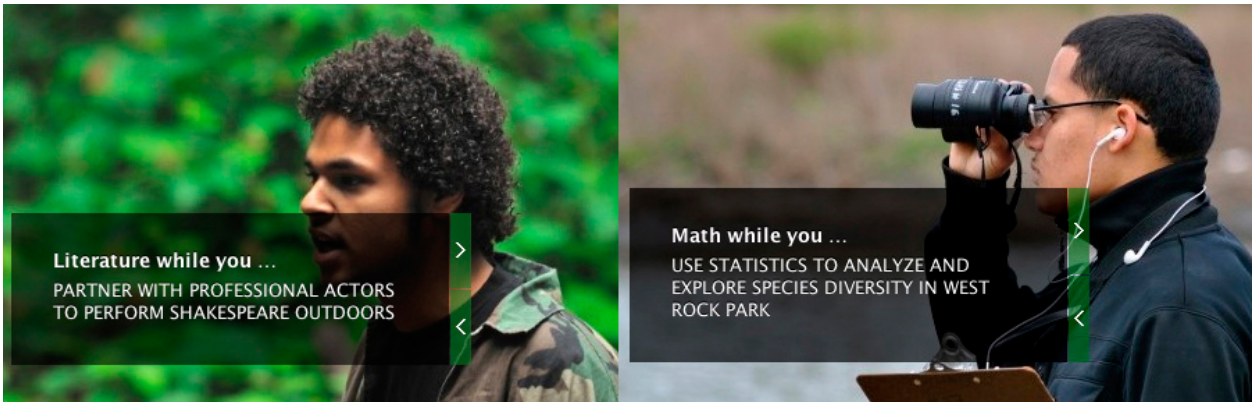
Common Ground High School: A Decidedly Uncommon School



by Barbara Cervone | April 2013

NEW HAVEN, CT— For as long as she can remember, Shantel has wanted to be a vet. Now this tenth grader is counting the hours until her afternoon assignment. She will be shadowing a livestock veterinarian—come to check the health of the goats, sheep, and chickens that Shantel helps to tend here at **Common Ground High School.**

Four miles from downtown New Haven, students like Shantel are being swept up and away by one of the first and finest environmentally focused schools in the United States. It's no surprise that Common Ground, a charter school with a most public mission, wins awards for being "green" while also galvanizing impressive levels of academic achievement.

Cliff, a lanky 17-year-old, talks with excitement about the senior project he's just begun with several other students. They are raising tilapia in a tank that Cliff, an experienced carpenter, built himself. It's not so much the tilapia that interests him, but what they leave behind.

"Fish waste is high in nitrogen, and nitrogen is a key nutrient for plants," Cliff explains. "But the pH level is critical, it needs to be close to neutral." Cliff and his teammates are figuring out how to control the pH in the fish water they collect.

As a member of Common Ground's compost crew, Cliff knows about the fertilizing power of natural waste. He gathers food scraps from the cafeteria and carts them to the compost heap that nourishes Common Ground's one-acre organic garden—which, in the growing season, provides fresh produce for student lunches (and more scraps).

Jackie, whose college acceptances are running nine for ten, describes her transformation from a mostly non-academic freshman to a senior passionate about learning—and a career as a food security analyst.

“I always had a passion for the environment, but not a lot of knowledge,” says Jackie. “When I started at Common Ground, I knew I’d like feeding the chickens, but I didn’t expect to become a serious student. I was wrong. Now I read and discuss and write endlessly, whether it’s about genetically modified food or world history.”

Visionary from the start



At Common Ground, breaking new ground is second nature by now. In 1990, its founders—teachers, environmentalists, concerned citizens, philanthropists—incorporated as the New Haven Ecology Project. They set a goal ahead of their time: to promote healthy lifestyles and model environmental practices at a working demonstration farm, school and environmental center—in an urban landscape.



Seven years later, the Ecology Project negotiated with the New Haven Department of Parks and Recreation to lease 20 acres of abandoned land at the base of West Rock Ridge State Park, northwest of downtown. There it created what has become Connecticut’s longest-running community farm, also a hub for backyard gardeners and environmentalists throughout the region.

The school soon followed. In the spring of 1997, with rising national interest in charter schools, Connecticut approved Common Ground’s application to start a charter (one of ten it authorized)—on the condition that it open by September. The first teachers and students at Common Ground High School used classrooms at nearby Southern Connecticut State University for academics. Then they walked to the West Rock site to remove invasive species, haul tons of illegally dumped garbage, and build a school from the ground up.

The school started small and has intentionally stayed that way. Today it enrolls 165 students, selected by lottery, from 16 different school districts. Eighty percent are young people of color, 70 percent are from the City of New Haven, and 60 percent quality for free or reduced lunch.

The results have been as remarkable as the crops and livestock that now thrive on the once discarded land, adjacent to the school. More than 96 percent of the school’s 2012 graduating class headed to college, compared to only 59 percent of the New Haven district’s graduates. After five years of gains—including the largest of any Connecticut high school in 2010—Common Ground High School students now outperform the state average in reading and writing, even though they often enter the school far behind. This March, the state recognized Common Ground and two other Connecticut public schools as its first three Connecticut Green LEAF Schools.

Common Ground’s community programs, which attract local youth of all ages, have flourished too. In 2002, 35 local kids signed up for its environmental summer camp; today enrollment tops 900. A robust after-school program draws half the Common Ground student body along with teens across the city, stretching their learning late into the afternoon. The number of young

participants in Common Ground service projects and job training opportunities has increased tenfold in ten years.

Authentic learning

"We see no tradeoff between academic rigor and student engagement, consistently high expectations and individual support, environmental learning and state standards," says Lizanne Cox, Common Ground's School Director. "All of these things are essential pieces of the educational puzzle."

Common Core Standards thus infuse classes at the school, and helping students achieve on high-stakes tests is a priority. Rather than focus on skill-and-drill learning alone, however, the school pushes students to tackle real problems and projects, work in teams, and perform for real audiences. "Teaching to the test" takes on an entirely new meaning here.

So does interdisciplinary learning. Faculty has devised a collection of unusual "block classes" taught by two teachers and combining two subjects. "Biodiversity," rooted in West Rock Park, develops student understanding of statistical analysis, ecology, and local species diversity. "Environmental Justice," an upper-level science and social studies course, focuses on the environmental challenges facing low-income and urban communities. "Power" combines physics and political science to understand energy policy issues in the United States.

Jackie singled out the block class "Drama" as her "most amazing experience"—and a big factor in her decision to become an avid student. An intensive residency with New Haven's Elm Shakespeare Company, it gave her the chance to perform Shakespeare under the guidance of experienced Shakespearean actors—in a forest amphitheater built by classmates.

"Shakespeare's text is intense and it can be hard for students to access it," Jackie explains. "To be able to go outside and act it out as well as look at it as a comparative text . . . it stopped being a foreign language but a second language. With local actors coaching us, it became part of our world."

For a school so small, the list of over 60 core academic courses is extraordinary both in length and diversity. In addition to the traditional sequence of subjects, foreign languages, and AP offerings, students may take courses like African Literature, Teen Memoirs, Research Writing, Genetics and Evolution,

How We Teach to the Test

"We have just closed out an anxious time of year for students and teachers—at Common Ground, and across Connecticut. Over the last two weeks, our students have survived a battery of serious, concentrated testing: the Connecticut Academic Performance Test.

"These tests have real stakes. Students must prove proficiency on them to graduate. Starting next year, these tests are one of a number of measures we use to determine whether Connecticut teachers are doing their job well. Test scores help families decide where their students go to school, and whether charter schools like Common Ground can keep their doors open.. . .

"We—students, educators, schools, families—get to decide how we respond to these tests. We can decide to ignore them. We can cancel classes for a month to focus on test prep. We can even push low-performing kids out of our schools in a truly perverse response to the challenges they pose.

"Or we can raise the stakes. We can turn these tests into something that matter in a much more authentic sense—into a tool for building a community that tackles real issues, has serious conversations, does significant work. At Common Ground, this is the strategy we've been trying to put into action.

Environmental Research, Global Conflict and Resolution, Documenting New Haven, Sustainable Design, and much more.

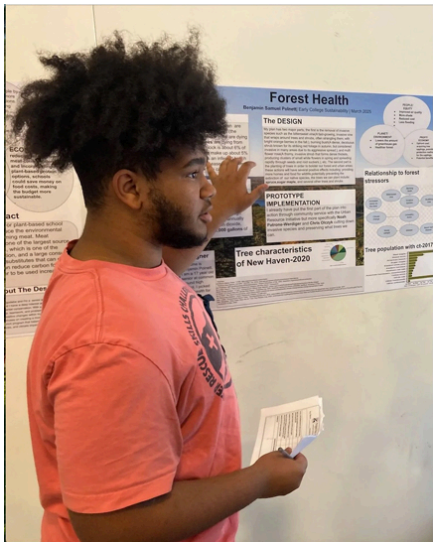
Outdoor learning at Common Ground takes place from dawn to dusk. Thirty students in the school's Green Job Corps perform paid jobs on and off of the school site—running environmental education programs, planting trees, helping to manage farmer's markets, leading farm tours.

Every student must also complete 15 hours of service before moving to the next grade level. This includes monthly trips to the Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen to prepare and serve food. Many students go far beyond this minimum.

A fresh take on environmentalism

"Environmentalism is really the study of relationships, about finding your place," says Common Ground social studies teacher Jeremy Stone. "Everything is connected," adds Natalie, a recent graduate. "We're all part of a sustainable design."

At Common Ground, the "sustainable design" includes practices that reinforce the connections among students and faculty. Advisories—called "Guidance" here—meet twice a week and stay together all four years. They focus on decision-making, academic and social challenges, and post-secondary plans.



"But it's more than that," says Cliff. "It's family." In a school where nearly all the students are college-bound, students and staff have cheered Cliff's ability to solve problems with his hands. "I'm not an academic scholar but a pragmatic learner," Cliff says, as he looks ahead to work as a tradesman, maybe linked to alternative energy. "I'd rather dig in the garden than do math equations in class. At Common Ground, that's more than okay " – though Cliff, like all Common Ground students, will have taken on four years of math before graduation.

Close teacher-student relationships are the norm. "The staff here is incredible," says Jackie. "There's always an opportunity to stay after school to work with teachers on assignments you don't understand. I even find myself staying after class just to talk with a teacher. Like yesterday, I spent time talking to my social studies teacher about World War I, which fascinates me."

In many high schools, leadership is an elective course. At Common Ground, environmentalism and leadership are one and the same, and permeate the school. "Everything at this school is about leadership," Shantel notes. "You couldn't escape it if you tried."

Just as teachers use academic standards to guide instruction, they incorporate school-wide leadership standards—featuring pride, ownership, wonder, effort, and respect—into plans for every Common Ground class. Twice each year, students complete a leadership survey that helps staff assess whether the school is living up to its vision that everyone leads.

In the block course “Ecologia,” for instance, students practice responsibility along with conversational Spanish as they garden and cook for the school in small student-led teams. In the Environmental Justice block, students have helped a team at Yale University launch a corner store providing healthy alternatives in a neighborhood where fast food reigns.

The required Senior Seminar demands that students publicly demonstrate leadership and knowledge through an environmental project that helps the New Haven community. There’s another condition: the project must be sustainable, lasting long after graduation day.



Stewards of the land

Few students enter Common Ground with a strong environmental ethic or a thirst for interdisciplinary study—or a deep desire to do farm chores in the dead of winter. Most find their way to the school because they are attracted to its small size or its promise of hands-on learning.

Yet few students leave Common Ground without an abiding commitment to environmental stewardship. More than a third of recent graduates planned to pursue an environmental field in college. They carry with them, too, a well-seasoned appreciation of the value of academic challenge, resourcefulness, and curiosity.

In a blog on the Common Ground website, staff member Sarah Tracy-Wanck writes about taking a group of students to a conference of the Northeast Organic Farming Association.

> On the drive home we sang pop songs, nominated each other for POWER awards-of-the-day, and discussed how we can apply our new knowledge and ideas to our school and home communities. Students had joined workshops that left them intrigued and eager to take action.

Freshman Maritza Rodriguez attended a “Combing and Carding in Preparation for Spinning” workshop to understand how she might work with the wool our sheep produce. Kathiana Torres and Stephanie Torres, who are about to take on care of our laying flock as part of our student-run egg business, attended an “Advanced Chicken Workshop.” There, they learned about different chicken-tractor designs, culling techniques and timing, and chicken reproduction. Anthony Duff explained, “I went to the ‘Gardening in Small Spaces’ workshop and got some really good ideas that I want to use in my garden at home.” Iranda Bailey-Russomano, who sees her future in agriculture, attended workshops related to her career goals, such as “Access to Land.”

As we headed back into New Haven, we discussed attending the Summer NOFA conference and identified various seminar topics that students could lead. An agriculture-related student-run business workshop? Urban composting designs? Modern food industrial complex 101? So many ideas, so much to do…