



## 2012-2013 Nominee Presentation Form

### **PART I - ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION**

#### **School and District's Certifications**

The signatures of the school principal and district superintendent (or equivalents) on the next page certify that each of the statements below concerning the school's eligibility and compliance with the following requirements is true and correct. *In no case is a private school required to make any certification with regard to the public school district in which it is located.*

1. The school has some configuration that includes one or more of grades K-12. (Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.)
2. The school has been evaluated and selected from among schools within the Nominating Authority's jurisdiction, based on high achievement in the three ED-GRS Pillars: 1) reduced environmental impact and costs; 2) improved health and wellness; and 3) effective environmental and sustainability education.
3. Neither the nominated public school nor its public school district is refusing the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district wide compliance review.
4. OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the public school district concluding that the nominated public school or the public school district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan to remedy the violation.
5. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the public school or the public school district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution's equal protection clause.
6. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the public school or public school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or public school district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.
7. The school meets all applicable federal, state, local and tribal health, environmental and safety requirements in law, regulations and policy and is willing to undergo EPA on-site verification.



U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools 2013

For Public Schools only:  Charter  Title I  Magnet  Choice

Name of Principal Ms. Lizanne Cox  
 (Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Common Ground High School  
 (As it should appear in the official records)

School  
 Mailing Address 358 Springside Avenue  
 (If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

New Haven CT 06515  
 City State Zip

County New Haven State School Code Number\* \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone ( 203 ) 389-4333 Fax ( 203 ) 389-7458

Web site/URL www.commongroundct.org E-mail lcox@commongroundct.org

I have reviewed the information in this application and certify that to the best of my knowledge all information is accurate.

Lizanne Cox Date January 11, 2013  
 (Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent\* Melissa Spear  
 (Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name\* Common Ground District Tel. ( 203 ) 389-4333

I have reviewed the information in this application and certify that to the best of my knowledge all information is accurate. This is one of the highest performing green schools in my jurisdiction.

Melissa Spear Date January 11, 2013  
 (Superintendent's Signature)

\*Private Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, write N/A in the space.



## **PART II – SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS**

### **Instructions to School Principal**

Provide a concise and coherent "snapshot" that describes how your school is representative of your jurisdiction's highest achieving green school efforts in approximately 800 words. Summarize your strengths and accomplishments. Focus on what makes your school worthy of the title U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School.

## **PART III – DOCUMENTATION OF STATE EVALUATION OF NOMINEE**

### **Instructions to Nominating Authority**

The Nominating Authority must document schools' high achievement in each of the three ED-GRS Pillars and nine Elements. For each school nominated, please attach documentation in each Pillar and Element. This may be the Authority's application based on the Framework and sample application or a committee's written evaluation of a school in each Pillar and Element.

### **Nominating Authority's Certifications**

The signature by the Nominating Authority on this page certifies that each of the statements below concerning the school's eligibility and compliance with the following requirements is true and correct.

1. The school has some configuration that includes one or more of grades K-12. (Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.)
2. The school is one of those overseen by the Nominating Authority which is highest achieving in the three ED-GRS Pillars: 1) reduced environmental impact and costs; 2) improved health and wellness; and 3) effective environmental and sustainability education.
3. The school meets all applicable federal civil rights and federal, state, local and tribal health, environmental and safety requirements in law, regulations and policy and is willing to undergo EPA on-site verification.

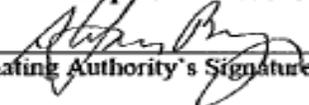
Name of Nominating Agency CT Dept. of Education

Name of Nominating Authority Mr. Stefan Pryor, Commissioner  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

**I have reviewed the information in this application and certify to the best of my knowledge that the**



school meets the provisions above.

  
(Nominating Authority's Signature)

Date 2/6/13

The nomination package, including the signed certifications and documentation of evaluation in the three Pillars should be converted to a PDF file and emailed to [green.ribbon.schools@ed.gov](mailto:green.ribbon.schools@ed.gov) according to the instructions in the Nominee Submission Procedure.

OMB Control Number: 1860-0509  
Expiration Date: February 28, 2015

#### Public Burden Statement

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, no persons are required to respond to a collection of information unless such collection displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 1860-0509. Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 37 hours per response, including time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. The obligation to respond to this collection is required to obtain or retain benefit P.L. 107-110, Sec. 501, Innovative Programs and Parental Choice Provisions. Send comments regarding the burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to the U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20202-4536 or email [ICDocketMgr@ed.gov](mailto:ICDocketMgr@ed.gov) and reference the OMB Control Number 1860-0509. Note: Please do not return the completed ED-Green Ribbon Schools application to this address.

## **Part II Summary of Achievements – Common Ground High School Prepared for the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools Program**

Common Ground High School – founded in 1997 as the nation’s first environmentally themed public charter school – is committed to creating the next generation of successful college students and powerful environmental leaders. Our student body – approximately 80% students of color, 70% from the City of New Haven, more than 50% qualifying for free or reduced lunch – is poised to bring new diversity to our nation’s college campuses and environmental movement.

Every day, Common Ground works to step forward as the nation’s greenest high school – exemplifying the pillars of the Green Ribbon Schools program. Here are some highlights:

### **Pillar I: Reduced Environmental Impact and Costs**

- We compost 100% of organic waste on our own campus, and participate fully in our city’s single-stream recycling program. We use only reusable dishes and flatware in our cafeteria. Our students collect data on recycling and waste reduction on a weekly basis, and a paid team of students manages recycling and composting programs.
- Students travel to school by public city buses, eliminating the environmental impact and costs of school buses. A solar array on our roof demonstrates alternative energy options. A recent full-school lighting retrofit has cut energy use.
- Three years ago, our students wrote and won a \$100,000 grant to fuel campus sustainability efforts. Students developed 36 sustainability proposals, and presented to peers, staff, and community, who selected the highest-impact strategies. All proposals were incorporated into our 10-year master plan, and the winners – related to rainwater recapture, waste reduction, and electricity – were implemented using grant funding.
- This spring, we begin construction of a model high-performing building on our campus. A solar array will provide approximately 70% of electricity, and a geothermal system will meet all heating and cooling needs. Rainwater gardens, an educational wetland, and other features will demonstrate low-impact design.

### **Pillar II: Improved Health and Wellness**

- Our urban farm grew more 7,000 pounds of fresh, sustainable, local produce last year. We use this harvest, and food from other Connecticut farms, to provide free, healthy school meals to 100% of our students.
- We practice organic land care on our 20-acre site – no pesticides, herbicides, or synthetic fertilizers are used.
- Expeditions at every grade level, more than a dozen outdoor adventure trips per year, and field experience across the curriculum engage 100% of our city students in hiking, camping, and other outdoor experiences.
- Model green cleaning, indoor air quality, environmental health policies are in action.

**Pillar III: Effective Environmental and Sustainability Education**

- Our campus – a 20-acre demonstration farm, at the base of a state park, in the city – creates a powerful learning laboratory.
- Every course is rooted in Common Core standards and state content standards, as well as in environmental leadership standards unique to Common Ground. We measure and track students' growth as environmental leaders just as we measure academic growth. To graduate, students must defend an electronic portfolio that demonstrates mastery of environmental leadership standards.
- Students master academic standards and build environmental literacy through a unique environmental curriculum. In Ecologia, for instance, students learn Spanish, nutrition, and leadership as they work in small student-led teams, cooking and eating from our urban farm. In Biodiversity, they measure species diversity in farm, forest, and city, and share their findings through a museum-quality outdoor exhibit. In Environmental Ventures, they use produce from our farm to develop small businesses.
- Our Green Jobs Corps connects 35 of our students with paid jobs at environmental organizations, along with a year-long leadership and career development curriculum. Partnerships with The Nature Conservancy, Yale University, and others allow students to take on environmental research and internships in the Dominican Republic and across the country.

This school-wide environmental commitment is making a real difference. Over the last five years, the percentage of our students earning proficient scores on state tests has doubled or nearly doubled in every subject area; in 2009, we were the state's only high school to exit "in need of improvement" status, and in 2010, our students made larger test score gains than their peers at every other Connecticut high school. Our dropout rate is 8 points below the state average, and 17 points below the city average. More than 96% of our last graduating class was accepted to higher education; 75% report that they do not have an immediate family member who has graduated from college. More than a third of last two graduating classes reported that they were interested in studying an environmental field in college.

Common Ground is ready to step forward as a national model. In 2011, we were one of the three schools honored by the NEA Green Prize in Public Education. In 2012, our principal was one of the first educators awarded the Presidential Innovation Award in Environmental Education. We would be honored to be a Green Ribbon School.

## Step 1: Green and Healthy Outlook

Common Ground launched in 1998 as the nation's first environmental charter high school – so our “green school” efforts are as old as our school. Common Ground was founded by community members and educators eager to connect city residents with the natural world, and to cultivate habits of healthy living and sustainable environmental practice. Our mission has remained steady since then.

From these roots, Common Ground has grown into a high school where we work to make sustainability and the environment part of everything we do. Common Ground has a number of structures in place to enact our commitment to sustainability, and to ensure that all members of our school community are engaged:

- An Environmental Leadership Committee – including our school director, executive director, sustainability coordinator, classroom teachers, and staff responsible for student leadership initiatives – coordinates our efforts to ensure that every student steps forward as an environmental leader.
- Our school-wide data team – made up of faculty from every academic department and our educational and curriculum leaders – has set annual goals related to sustainability, just as they set academic performance goals. For instance, they have set and measured progress toward targets related to waste reduction and our students’ growth as environmental leaders.
- Our site planning and building committee – responsible for the development of our 10-year master site plan and the design of a new building on our campus – includes students, teachers, organizational leaders, and community members.
- Our Health & Wellness Committee – including students, teachers, and administrators – takes the lead to encourage physical exercise, promote healthy eating, and address indoor air quality.
- Our Environmental Leadership and Sustainability Coordinator works full time to support teachers as they integrate environmental leadership and sustainability in their classes, and coordinates our campus sustainability efforts.

Given the important roles that these groups play, our current “Green Team” is structured differently than might make sense at other schools. We began convening this group in 2011 to assess our current sustainability efforts, identify gaps in our work, and convene the right groups to fill these gaps. Meetings are open to any interested member of the school community, and consistently involve our Executive Director, School Director, and Environmental Leadership/Sustainability Coordinator. This group has taken on several important efforts. For instance, this group realized that we did not have a coherent indoor air quality strategy, so supported a student who wanted to take the lead in conducting an air quality assessment, brought in outside expertise to support this assessment, and used this assessment the basis for participation in the “Tools for Schools” process. This year, the group identified a green procurement policy as a gap in our school-wide sustainability commitment, and convened a group of those who make most of our school purchasing decisions to create such a policy.

While students are engaged in many of these school-wide structures and efforts, we have also recognized the importance of engaging them in our “green school” efforts in other ways, as well. For instance:

- Three years ago, our student Environmental Leadership Team wrote and received a \$100,000 grant to initiate a major student-led sustainability effort.

- Several students have taken on school sustainability issues through our Environmental Honors program. Students (1) developed a plan for rainwater harvesting on our campus, (2) helped us eliminate disposables from our school cafeteria, and (3) developed baseline data on electricity usage, for instance.
- Our student Environmental Leadership Team has participated actively in the Keep CT Cool Challenge, developing and implementing campus sustainability plans.
- Students have engaged in our green school efforts through their academic courses, as well: conducting campus trash and energy audit, developing interpretive exhibits that educate about our campus sustainability practices, and more.

We have been eager to join in the Green LEAF school process, recognizing it as the next critical stage of Common Ground's sustainability work. Common Ground staff members took part in early planning meetings among Connecticut's environmental education leaders when the national Green Ribbon Schools competition was first announced. After joining in on the conversations that led to the launch of CT Green LEAF Schools, we were the first school to sign on to participate. Four of our lead staff – Executive Director, School Director, Director of Development & Community Engagement, and Environmental Leadership and Sustainability Coordinator – independently completed the Green LEAF assessment. We then sat down together to reality check scores, come to agreement on strengths and weaknesses, and identify next steps. After sharing this initial assessment with the leaders of the CT Green LEAF program, we engaged a variety of community members to finalize our assessment and get to work on the areas where we needed to improve. This proposal reflects that collective work.

One thing that this assessment made clear is that much of what we have done at Common Ground is home grown, rather than being connected to state-wide or national tools or standards. A good example: while our work is consistently aligned with state standards and Common Core standards, we have not yet used NAAEE standards. Instead, we developed and implemented our own set of environmental "big ideas" starting in 2008, and then a set of school-wide environmental leadership standards starting in 2010. We recognize, though, that aligning our work to these national standards is important. To make this happen, two of our instructional coaches – teachers released from part of their classroom responsibilities to support school-wide efforts – have taken responsibility for helping us evaluate and implement the NAAEE standards during this school year.

#### **Recent Environmental Awards & Recognition**

Common Ground recognized as one of 3 national winners in the Green Prize for Public Education from the National Environmental Education Foundation and the NEA Foundation (2011).

Liz Cox, School Director, received the Presidential Innovation Award in Environmental Education from the EPA and the President's Council on Environmental Quality (2012)

Jill Keating, Environmental Educator, received the National Farm-Based Educator of the Year Award (2011)

Tricia Johnson, Environmental Science teacher, was chosen to participate in the Fulbright Japan Education for Sustainable Development program (2010-11)

Common Ground was recognized for Best Practices in Sustainability Education by COEAA and the Connecticut Partnership for Sustainable Education (2012)

Common Ground students were one of four high school winners in the 2001 Keep CT Cool Challenge.

While our work around national standards is new, our commitment to reaching beyond our campus is as old as our school. Common Ground is a community environmental organization as well as an environmentally themed high school; as a result, promoting environmental understanding in the broader community is a critical part of our mission. Last year, more than 10,000 children and adults joined in our educational programs – including ecology camps and after-school programs for more than 1,200 New Haven children, farm- and forest-based field trips reaching 4,000 local students, and adult and family programs focused on gardening, composting, outdoor adventures and more.

We work to blur the lines between these community environmental programs and Common Ground High School. We share information on community programs with all of the families of our high school students. Our high school students take on paid work helping to lead our summer camps, after-school programs, and weekend programs for families. Our environmental educators engage upperclassmen interested in sharing what they have learned in their environmental courses with community audiences.

As a community organization, and as a small under-resourced charter school, we recognize that community partners are a critical part of our sustainability work. We work with a variety of partners to create a greener, healthier school and community:

- Community partners enhance environmental learning opportunities inside our academic courses and school day curriculum. For instance, Environmental science and ecology professors from the University of New Haven and Yale University are guest teachers in our science courses, and have helped us develop lab and field science experiences that prepare our students for college-level work.
- Community partnerships enhance students' environmental learning outside the school day, as well. For instance, a partnership with The Nature Conservancy places our students in internships across the country each summer. In collaboration with a Yale Geosciences professor and Amistad America, our students take part in a semester-long ocean biogeochemistry internship that culminates in a research trip in the Dominican Republic. Through the New Haven Arts Council, our students staged an exhibit in a downtown gallery, focused on the theme, "What Sustains Us?"
- Common Ground's Green Jobs Corps places students in paid work opportunities in environmental organizations: planting and surveying street trees with the Urban Resources Initiative, leading environmental programs in housing projects with Solar Youth, and helping operate farmers markets with CitySeed, for instance.

While our first commitment is to the city of New Haven, we are also ready to step forward as a model and partner for schools across Connecticut and the country. We have already begun this work in a number of ways:

- Leading workshops for the National Green Schools Conference, the Connecticut Partnership for Sustainability Education, the National Science Teachers Association, and other networks.
- Joining as active members of in LEAF – a national network of urban environmental high schools, facilitated by The Nature Conservancy – and hosting a retreat for educators from LEAF schools on Common Ground's site.
- Launching a major new School Garden Resource Center to support the development and integration of educational gardens at schools state-wide through professional development, mini-grants, curriculum development, and other strategies.

- Securing a grant from the New England Environmental Education Association and the EPA to support professional development opportunities on our site.

We have committed to stepping forward as the nation's greenest high school, and recognize that we still have much work to do in order to make this vision a reality. We will continue to strengthen our work, and are glad that the Green LEAF process provides us with an opportunity to do so.

## Step 2: Environmental and Sustainability Literacy

### Curriculum and Instructional Practices

At Common Ground, the local environment is our teacher, textbook, and classroom. We use active, authentic environmental learning as the primary vehicle for a standards-based, college prep curriculum. Every course starts with Common Core standards and state content standards, as well as with environmental leadership standards that we have developed. We mobilize local environmental issues to make these standards relevant and engaging, and to support environmental literacy.

Common Ground's site is a unique learning resource, and the heart of all we do. Our school building sits on 20 acres of city park land –home to educational and production gardens, a forested outdoor classroom, a farmhouse, a historic spring and wetland, meadows, animal yards, and a variety of native plantings. This site is located at the base of West Rock Ridge State Park, one of Connecticut's largest and only urban state parks, home to a variety of unique biological communities. Common Ground is also inside city limits of New Haven, and we see the entire city as part of our campus. These three places – a demonstration farm, abutting a forested state park, inside an urban area – create a learning laboratory for all of our students and teachers.

When a Common Ground student graduates, their transcript tells a unique story. In Ecologia, students practice conversational Spanish, nutrition, and leadership as they work in small student-led teams, cooking and eating from our urban farm. In Biodiversity, they measure species diversity in farm, forest, and city, and share their findings through a museum-quality outdoor interpretive exhibit. In Environmental Justice, they help to launch a healthy corner store and examine the impacts of particulate matter on the city's asthma rates. Our students take Environmental Research and AP Environmental Science, Food & The Environment and Sustainable Design, alongside more traditional college prep courses. Many of these courses are team-taught blocks, where two teachers from two subject areas integrate core academic content around a compelling environmental theme.

We work to integrate environmental themes into all our courses, not just those with "environment" in the name. For instance, in our drama class, students partner with actors from the Elm Shakespeare Company for an intensive 12-week residency. Students focus on the role of the natural world imagery in Shakespeare's work – and finish their study through a production in our outdoor classroom. Students learn data analysis by performing trash periodic trash audits and tracking our use of electricity, physical fitness by hiking in West Rock Park, and AP Government by taking on a mock environmental trial in partnership with law professors and students.

Experiences outside the school building extend academic learning. Our students complete senior projects focused on social justice and environmental topics. They compete in the state-wide Envirothon competition and participate in an after-school environmental leadership club. They teach younger

students about important environmental issues through after-school, summer, and school day programs.

### **Measuring Outcomes and Student Assessment**

We measure the impact of our environmental curriculum in reference to our school's core purpose: Are we creating the next generation of successful college students and powerful environmental leaders? We are particularly committed to making sure the next generation of college graduates and environmental leaders reflects the diversity of our student body: 80% students of color, 70% from the City of New Haven, almost 60% qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

We use the same approach to measure our students' academic growth and their growth as environmental leaders:

- Students take school-wide benchmark assessments twice per year, focused on mastery of Common Core and environmental leadership standards. Our environmental leadership benchmarks – developed using a range of existing, research-based survey tools – focus on the skills, behaviors, and attitudes students need to become powerful, sustainable leaders.
- In every class, students and teachers use a school-wide rubric to measure their mastery of environmental leadership standards, as demonstrated through major projects and performance tasks. In our core environmental courses, unit pre- and post- assessments and regular formative assessments also measure mastery of environmental concepts, skills, and content.
- Our environmental leadership rubric is also put to use to measure students' leadership capacity in programs from Green Jobs Corps, to student government, to community service projects.
- Over four years, students create an electronic portfolio of artifacts, rubrics, and reflections that demonstrate their environmental leadership growth. This portfolio includes both curricular and extracurricular experiences; starting next year, students will defend this portfolio before members of the community before they graduate.
- Our teachers work in data teams twice monthly to examine assessment results, identify strategies that respond to these results, implement these strategies, and measure their impact.

While we believe that this assessment strategy does a good job of measuring students' academic learning and their growth as environmental leaders – and their mastery of environmental concepts and skills within environmental courses – we are committed to strengthening how we measure their environmental literacy school-wide. Between now and the start of the next school year, we will develop and implement a tool that measures students' understanding of critical environmental issues and ideas, tied to the NAAEE standards. This is one of the key areas of growth that we identified in our Green LEAF school self-assessment.

Right now, though, we can share the following indicators of impact:

- 34% of our last graduating class completed AP Environmental Science, and 40% of these students earned 3 or better on the exam. When Common Ground began to build its Advanced Placement program in 2008, Environmental Science was our first offering, and we have continued to teach the class since then.
- Over the last five years, the percentage of our students earning proficient scores on state tests has doubled in every subject area; in 2009, we were the state's only high school to leave "in need of improvement" status, and in 2010, our students made the largest test score gains of any Connecticut high school.

- In our last graduating class, 96% of students were accepted to college, though about 75% do not have any members of their immediate families who have graduated from college. Our dropout rate is less than 3% – 8 points below the state average, and 17 points below the city average.
- In each of the last two graduating classes, nearly one third of students have expressed interest in pursuing field in college that directly relates to Common Ground’s environmental mission.

### **Professional Development for All Staff**

The results described above have been possible in large part because of Common Ground’s commitment to continuous professional growth. Our entire teaching faculty takes part in a week-long summer institute at the start of each summer, and at least a day of every institute is dedicated to Common Ground’s work related to sustainability, environmental leadership, and using the local environment as a teaching tool. Our school day ends early each Wednesday to allow for faculty to collaborate. Faculty meetings this fall have included a focused on integrating community-based environmental projects into the curriculum, employing the school-wide environmental leadership rubric, and supporting students as they development their electronic leadership portfolios. Several of our teachers are active participants and presenters in environmental professional development opportunities off of our campus, as well; in the last year, they have led or joined in workshops through the National Green Schools Conference, the National Farm-Based Education Association, and the Connecticut Outdoor and Environmental Education Association, for instance.

We have dedicated the resources necessary to provide ongoing coaching, mentoring, and support to our teachers, as well. Our full-time environmental leadership and sustainability coordinator is a critical resource in this work – supporting teachers as they integrate environmental leadership standards, and as they take on authentic environmental projects on our campus and in the community. Another half-time staff position focuses on engaging our students and teachers in leadership opportunities that advance food justice and sustainable agriculture. Our environmental science teacher is released from one period of teaching to provide mentoring to new teachers, and the social science teacher who leads our sustainable design, environmental ventures, and food & the environment courses leads our curriculum development work. While students’ academic growth is the top priority for both of these teachers, they are certainly strong advocates for environmental literacy in their coaching and leadership work.

While this is a good start, the Green LEAF assessment process has helped us realize that we need to do more. This year, we have set the goal that every one of our teachers participate in at least two environmental professional development opportunities; our Environmental Leadership and Sustainability Coordinator is taking the lead in identifying these opportunities and encouraging teachers to participate. At this year’s Summer Teacher’s Institute, environment and sustainability will be even stronger themes than usual, as all teachers work to integrate environmental literacy into their professional development plans for the first time. We are also beginning to document the curricula for core environmental classes in order to share them with other educators – and, as noted, we will begin to offer professional development opportunities for teachers from other schools on our campus this Spring.

### **Step 3: Healthy School Environment**

Common Ground is serious about creating a healthy school environment – because we know that it is critical to our students’ academic success, and because health is a critical part of our organization’s mission. We meet or exceed all state statutes related to environmental health:

- Common Ground students travel to school by city public transit, rather than by school buses; as a result, school buses never idle on our campus. We ban personal vehicles – with exceptions for handicapped access – from driving up the hill to our school building.
- While our urban farm is not certified organic, we use and model sustainable and organic land care across our campus. No pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers are used in caring for our site, in accordance with our official Integrated Pest Management policy. We belong to the Connecticut Northeast Organic Farming Association, have signed their Farmer’s Pledge, and regularly host programs on organic gardening and land care.
- As part of our commitment to Indoor Air Quality, we have banned air fresheners, perfume spraying and room deodorizers. All of our classrooms have operable windows to allow adequate ventilation.
- Our board-approved Green Cleaning Policy ensures that all products used on campus are independently certified as environmentally preferable, as required by law.
- We comply with mandated testing related to radon, and have acted on past test results to remediate potential threats of exposure. Smoking is not allowed anywhere on our campus. We have taken precautions to ensure that delivery vehicles do not impact air quality, as well – by scheduling most of these deliveries outside school hours, and by segregating all major deliveries from the building entrance used by students and teachers.
- While we have not participated in the Collaborative for High Performance Schools, our new school building – described in more detail below – will exceed the high-performance building standards established by Connecticut state law.

Ensuring that we are doing all in our power to ensure healthy indoor air quality was identified as a top priority in our Green LEAF assessment process. Over the last year, we have taking a number of steps in this direction. We selected an IAQ /IEQ Coordinator – our Environmental Leadership & Sustainability Coordinator – and engaged a team of our students and our Health & Wellness Committee to support her in this role. One of our students partnered with a professional mold/mildew specialist and our Environmental Leadership and Sustainability Coordinator to conduct a thorough assessment of indoor air quality in our building, and provide a workshop to our faculty to raise awareness of IAQ issues. In partnership with our Executive Director, this team created an IAQ /IEQ Management Plan, drawing on the Tools for Schools Action Toolkit. We hired a mold/mildew specialist to help us examine indoor air quality, and established a set procedure to ensure dust control and adequate fresh air flow. Just this week, a dozen of our students and three members of our staff completed and IAQ/IEQ certification training with Kenny Foscue and the Department of Public Health.

Recognizing that environmental health and justice issues are particularly relevant and important to low-income students of color growing up in cities, we address environmental health issues across our curriculum. Our Environmental Justice course – one of our core environmental offerings – pushes students to explore and address the disproportionate impact of environmental challenges on low-income communities, communities of color, and cities. Students in this class have taken on community action projects related to urban air and water quality, quality of life and public infrastructure issues in public housing projects and low-income neighborhoods, and healthy food access in food insecure communities, for instance. In our Power course, students have monitored the impact of mobile diesel emissions on air quality, looking at how the health of city residents are impacted by riding on city buses

and living adjacent to major highways. Environmental Science students and those in AP Environmental Science examine a range of environmental health issues. In Sustainable Design, students examine the design principles that support human health, and take on independent projects that put these principles into action.

#### Step 4: Healthy Nutrition

Common Ground's mission puts "cultivating habits of healthy living" front and center. In particular, we recognize food as a powerful and shared entry point for work to promote health and sustainability. Common Ground's Health and Wellness committee – including, as we noted above, teachers, our school chef, students, and administrators – plays a central role in pushing all aspects of our work to support good nutrition and physical activity. In reality, though, food is such a central part of our school's environmental commitment that a variety of members of school community – including many of our students, our farm manager, our environmental education staff, our organizational leadership, and more – take leadership roles in our nutrition work, as outlined below.

Common Ground's site includes a 1-acre production garden and smaller educational gardens. Last year, our farm produced more than 35,000 servings of fresh, local food; we commit to putting at least half of this harvest to use in our school cafeteria, while sharing the rest through local farmer's markets, educational programs, and donations to local emergency food providers. Though we are not a certified organic farm, we use only organic growing methods to produce this food. A high hoop house and greenhouse extend the harvest into more of the school year, and allow us to have salad greens from our garden even in the dead of winter. Our school kitchen is a certified commercial kitchen; students from our Green Jobs Corps work with our kitchen staff to process the summer's harvest into pesto, tomato sauce, pickles, and other value-added products for use throughout the school year.

In addition to the food grown on our own farm, we have developed relationships with other local farms to provide produce including apples, pumpkins, milk and other produce that we cannot grow in large volume on site. We are committed to continuing to grow this farm-to-school work. This year, we joined with CitySeed and the New Haven Public Schools in developing a successful proposal to the USDA Farm to School program, which will allow us to hire a full-time local food "forager," responsible for bringing more CT-grown food to Common Ground and other public schools across New Haven.

Working with these raw materials, our school kitchen is on the frontline of the battle for good eating habits among our nation's teenagers. Every day, Common Ground prepares meals that are tasty, healthy, and free of charge for 100% of our students: breakfast, lunch, and two snacks. We are always taste-testing and refining to ensure our food is nutritious AND flavorful, rooted in our students' cultures AND stretching their palates, combining international cuisines AND local ingredients. Every one of these meals exceeds nutrition standards established by the USDA, and nearly 100% of our school lunches are cooked from scratch in our school kitchen. Vegetarian and vegan options are available every day and we have observed Meatless Mondays for two years. We are currently experimenting with a strategy where we offer entirely vegetarian meals on random days throughout the week. Our school chef, Rhonda DeLoatch, is a recognized leader in school nutrition; she has appeared on Chopped on the Food Network, and travelled to the White House this Spring where she was recognized for her work bringing healthy eating to Common Ground.

Our Urban Farm is a resource for Common Ground's curriculum as well as our school lunch program, and healthy food is a priority school-wide. In Ecologia– a team-taught Spanish and Ecology course taken by many of our freshmen and sophomores – students practice conversational Spanish and learn

principles of ecology by working in small student-led teams in our production gardens. In Food & The Environment, students dive deep into food policy issues, the science of traditional and industrial food production, and the environmental consequences of our food choices; students visit Monsanto facilities and organic farms, conduct labs that compare traditional plant breeding and advanced tissue culture, and encounter works like *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *King Corn*. In Environmental Ventures, students turn produce from our farm into products for sale, learning entrepreneurial skills and earning cash based on the success of their ventures. Last year, four of six project groups in our Senior Seminar course chose to focus their capstone senior projects on food access issues facing New Haven. Healthy nutrition is not a stand-alone class or a single unit; it is a consistent theme across the curriculum.

Our healthy food work reaches beyond our campus, as well. For instance:

- We are the fiscal agent for Connecticut's FoodCorps program, the state chapter of the national community service program focused on school nutrition, farm-to-school, and school gardens. New Haven's FoodCorps member is housed at Common Ground, and takes on work both on our campus and in the New Haven Public Schools. At Common Ground, our FoodCorps member runs an after-school cooking club, among a number of other activities.
- This fall, Common Ground launched a School Garden Resource Center, helping schools in Greater New Haven and Bridgeport to develop educational food gardens and fully integrate them into the school curriculum through professional development workshops, stipends for school garden coordinators, direct support building school gardens, and more.

Students are leaders in healthy food work, both on and off our campus. In 2011, students in our Environmental Justice course helped lead community organizing and outreach activities to promote a new Healthy Corner Store in one food insecure New Haven neighborhoods. In 2012, seniors launched a new student-run venture called Fresh Food Heroes, aiming to get produce from our farm to low income residents cross New Haven. Last year, a Common Ground student became the first youth member of the New Haven Food Policy Council; this year, more than a dozen Common Ground students have actively participated in the development of a new city-wide Food Policy Action Plan. This fall, student interest led us to launch a new after-school Farmtastics program, allowing students take on small farm-based business ventures, join in the work of operating the farm, and more. Members of our Green Jobs Corps take on paid after-school and summer jobs (1) leading food- and farm-based educational programs for elementary students, (2) maintaining our farm, (3) operating farm markets, including a new on-site farmstand and a mobile farm market serving public housing projects and low-income neighborhoods, and (4) helping to build and maintain school and community gardens across the city.

### Step 5: Physical Well-Being

Common Ground encourages and supports student fitness both inside and outside the school day. As a foundation, all of our students must earn a full credit in physical education before they graduate; our physical education class meets every day for 65 minutes, and focuses on life-long fitness activities such as yoga, hiking, and cross-training. However, we recognize that two semester-long courses, over the course of four years, do not offer the regular opportunities for fitness that our students need and deserve. We respond to this challenge in several ways:

- Our after-school programs offer fitness opportunities – including African and Hip-Hop Dance, recreational sports, a coed interscholastic basketball team, capture the flag, fitness club, rock

climbing, a weekly swimming program at a local high school pool, and more – every day of the week. On the average day, 70-80 of our 165 students join in our after-school programs.

- Last Spring, we initiated a school-wide FitBook challenge to encourage healthy behaviors. Students and teachers earn FitBook points by choosing healthy meals, engaging in 20 or more minutes of exercise, or taking part in health education activities. They earn prizes, individually and as advisory groups, based on their participation.
- During each of our bimonthly school-wide POWER assemblies, we recognize a student who demonstrates a commitment to healthy eating and physical fitness in front of the entire student body.

Outdoor experiences and adventures play a particularly important part in Common Ground's physical fitness strategy and school culture. Students' Common Ground experience begins with a freshman campout in tent platforms on Common Ground's site; for most, it is their first experience sleeping outdoors. With each passing year, students take on more ambitious and independent outdoor expeditions; for instance, all juniors take part in a multi-day camping trip in which they complete a number of team challenge activities. Our annual All-School Hike is one of our longest-running and most important community traditions, as well. Beyond these universal experience, Common Ground's Adventure Club organizes more than a dozen significant outdoor expeditions a year – this year including winter camping trips to the White Mountains, backpacking trips in Massachusetts and New Jersey, and overnight canoe and biking trips in Connecticut. Through partnerships with the Appalachian Mountain Club and Trailblazer, Common Ground hosts an outdoor gear locker – including everything from long underwear to cross-country skis to backpacks – that puts these adventures within reach for all students. In addition to serving 100% of Common Ground students, this gear locker is available to other New Haven programs that get young people out into the natural world.

Students get outside through a variety of curricular experiences, as well. Ecologia, as we already noted, includes weekly work in small teams on Common Ground's farm. In our Biodiversity class, students head out of the classroom to monitor bird and plant diversity in a variety of ecological settings, including our farm, the state park adjacent to our site, and a city park. Other classes – including Food & the Environment, Algebra 2, Environmental Ventures, and Drama – involve extended academic investigations on Common Ground's site.

We are committed to ensuring that students and teachers know how to protect themselves from overexposure to the sun in all these experiences. Our biology teacher includes several lessons on sun safety and related health problems in our biology course. In addition, our Environmental Leadership and Sustainability Coordinator will share information from the EPA Sunwise program with all staff who engage students in outdoor activities starting this Spring.

As with other aspects of our environmental work, we push students to step forward as leaders in promoting physical fitness. For instance, student members of our Green Jobs Corps take on paid jobs leading outdoor adventure programs for more than 1,000 New Haven K-8 students each year. Members of our Adventure Club help to plan and lead all expeditions. Our Freshmen Orientation Leaders, all Common Ground upperclassmen, take primarily responsibility for leading the outdoor activities and freshman campout that welcome our new students to campus.

## **Step 6: Energy Efficiency and Water Conservation**

Common Ground is committed to modeling sustainability across our campus, including reducing energy and water use. Historically, this has meant using a variety of low-cost, high-impact strategies to reduce energy and water use, and to promote water quality:

- In 2007, Common Ground installed an array of photovoltaic solar panels on the school's roof. The panels were provided through a generous donation by the Connecticut Clean Energy fund. Data from these panels is displayed on a monitor in our front office, and on the web.
- Students use existing CT Transit public bus service to get to and from school, and for many field trips, avoiding additional fuel consumption for buses.
- Our students have installed rain barrels on our farmhouse; the water is used to irrigate our gardens. We also use drip irrigation in our production gardens, which minimizes water waste, and created a retention pond to capture stormwater which we can then use to irrigate our gardens.
- Our parking lot is not paved, supporting stormwater infiltration.
- Common Ground uses simple design strategies to reduce heating costs. Our school building is built into the hillside, resulting in reduced heating cost in winter and cooling in summer. Solar gain from the greenhouse on south side of the farmhouse reduces heating costs and energy use. Electronic thermostats turn down the heat at night and on weekends.

Three years ago, our students and staff realized that these existing sustainability strategies were not enough. We wanted to step forward as the nation's greenest high school, and began working to reach this goal. Our students wrote and received a \$100,000 grant from the State Farm Youth Advisory Board to jump-start this process. Inspired by this success, 36 teams of students developed proposals for living our commitment to sustainability. Every student and teacher, and many of our community and board members, voted on these proposals in a community-wide Leading Green Fair. The winning strategies were given a share of the \$100,000 grant – allowing students and the school to install rainwater recapture strategies, retrofit all lighting in our school, build two new outdoor recycling centers made entirely from reclaimed material, integrate a fly ash concrete foundation into the design of a new building on our campus, and streamline our composting and recycling programs.

This student-led project – called Leading Green – launched a school-wide effort. In 2010, all 36 student sustainability proposals were integrated into a new 10-year master site plan for Common Ground's campus. This plan, developed by a committee that included students, teachers, community members, board members, and our organization's leaders, was built around clear commitments to sustainability: reducing our carbon footprint and energy use, while eliminating our dependence on fossil fuels; addressing stormwater runoff on our site, etc.

This spring, we will put the most significant components of this plan into action. We will construct a new school building on our campus, which will meet the standards for LEED certification (current projected level: Gold) and exceed Connecticut high-performing building standards. At the same time, we will make changes to our site that allow us to model low-impact design principles. This project will enact our sustainability commitment at a much more ambitious and comprehensive level:

- Solar photovoltaic will provide approximately 70% of the new building's electrical supply.
- A geothermal system will meet 100% of the heating and cooling needs of the new building.

- Rainwater gardens, infiltration swales, and a new educational wetland will address stormwater and water quality issues, while also demonstrating low-impact design practices for our community and students.
- A wooden framing system, a high-performing building envelope, the use of reclaimed and recycled building materials, and passive ventilation systems will all dramatically reduce the climate change impact of our building – helping us approach zero-emissions.

This new building – like our current campus – will be designed as a teaching tool. Energy and water issues are already integrated throughout our curriculum. Power – a team-taught science and social science course – focuses entirely on the science and policy of energy production and use. Our Sustainable Design course engages students with the principles and practices of low-impact design and high-performing buildings, and culminates in design projects that model these principles and practices. Environmental Science and AP Environmental Science include major units on energy and water issues. All of these classes currently engage with the site. As we enter the construction process, students in these classes will also (1) continue to participate in the design process, (2) document the changes on our site using video and blog entries, and (3) develop a new series of interpretive exhibits to explain the sustainability principles and practices demonstrated by the project. The campus and building that result from this process will provide numerous new learning opportunities, as well.

### Step 7: Green Purchasing and Waste Management

Common Ground’s teachers, students, and school leaders have worked together to create an approach to waste management that reflects our total commitment to sustainability, and our goal of modeling and educating about our environmental impact:

- Common Ground participates fully in New Haven’s single stream recycling program.
- All of Common Ground’s organic waste is composted, along with leaves from the site. Common Ground’s compost is used to enrich our own gardens, and is available for sale to the public through a student-run business venture.
- In our cafeteria, students use only reusable plates, silverware, cups and bowls. Students did research to analyze the environmental impact of various options for dishes, and Common Ground chose the materials that students found to be most sustainable.
- Once a week, students collect data on recycling rates and waste production; our guidance/advisory groups rotate responsibility for collecting these data. Recycling and waste data are displayed publicly, along with photographs and educational materials, at our indoor waste management center.
- Students are paid through our Green Jobs Corps to manage our recycling and composting programs; these students are part of a leadership council that conduct ongoing work to develop a school-wide culture of waste reduction and recycling.
- All recycling, composting, and trash containers are clearly identified with a common, graphic labeling system.
- Through the Leading Green process, students worked with community partners to build and design two outdoor waste management centers – made from reclaimed lumber from diseased

urban street trees – to support improved composting and recycling. Students also designed a new indoor recycling center and waste management system to encourage waste reduction and recycling.

- Students conducted a major school-wide waste audit before we enacted this comprehensive approach to waste management, and a follow-up audit will take place this Spring.
- Waste management issues are integrated into the curriculum in a variety of ways. For instance, our Ecologia class is currently developing a compost web page to educate students, staff, and visitors on our recycling and composting strategies.

This waste management approach – managed by our Environmental Leadership and Sustainability Coordinator – is helping us make progress toward our goal: zero waste. Now, we are working to bring this comprehensive, all-out, systematic approach to green purchasing, as well. Based on the results of the Green LEAF assessment, our Green Team made purchasing and procurement a top priority for this fall. We convened a task force that included students, all the staff who make major purchasing decisions, and our Green Team leaders. This group has developed a draft purchasing plan rooted in sustainability principles. We will bring this procurement policy before our board for approval in the next two months, and will then put it into action.

**Common Ground Procurement Policy  
Key Principles**

Conserving resources – which means ...

- a) evaluating and reducing the need to purchase goods, materials and services;
- b) purchasing goods, materials and services that use recycled products;
- c) purchasing goods and materials with structures that require less material to manufacture;
- d) purchasing goods and materials that require less packaging; and
- e) reusing, recycling and recovering goods and materials.

2) Conserving energy – which means ...

- a) purchasing goods, materials and services where the consumption of energy (electricity and fossil fuels) during production, transportation, usage and delivery is minimized;
- b) purchasing goods, materials and services where renewable forms of energy are substituted during production, transportation, usage and delivery for non-renewable forms of energy; and
- c) purchasing and using goods, materials and services that have or use structure that facilitate energy efficiency and resource conservation.

3. Promoting pollution prevention, waste reduction and diversion – which means ...

- a) purchasing goods and materials that are easy to recycle;
- b) purchasing goods and materials with structures that facilitates disassembly for processing, recycling and waste management;
- c) purchasing goods and materials with packed with recycled products or materials that are recyclable;
- d) purchasing goods and materials with a manufacturing process that avoids the creation of waste and pollutants at source;
- e) purchasing goods and materials that are used or remanufactured;
- f) purchasing services that minimize adverse environmental impacts;
- g) purchasing goods and materials that have greater durability and longer life-span; and
- h) using goods and materials in a manner that minimizes adverse environmental impacts.

4. Protecting Human Health and Well-being – which means ...

- (a) Purchasing goods and services that have ethical standards in their manufacturing processes
- (b) where practicable, requiring the purchase of substitute or alternative goods, materials or services in place of goods or materials that may pose an elevated risk to human health, safety and the environment.

Common Ground began as the nation's first environmental charter school. We work continuously and inclusively to model sustainability and create a new, diverse generation of powerful environmental leaders. Our students, community, staff, and leaders are all critical partners in this work. We see the Green LEAF process as a critical part of this work, and are glad for the opportunity to participate.