

Think Forward New England: Profiles of Innovation

Common Ground High School



Image courtesy of Common Ground High School

Key Lessons

- Beyond staff mindsets and behaviors, building student voice and agency schoolwide requires formal structures for feedback and participation.
- Paid student jobs can build student agency through relevant work experience, while also expanding the school's capacity.
- Increased choice and flexibility in students' schedules can meet adolescents' developmental need for greater autonomy.

Key Questions

- What systems might high schools establish to encourage, solicit, and act on student feedback?
- What learn-and-earn models might high schools create to engage students in rigorous learning experiences that also give back to the community?
- What strategies might high schools employ to shift toward a culture that values student voice?

Introduction

“It started with students’ feedback about Zoom classes being too long,” said Candi Fulcher, a teacher at Common Ground High School. Due to a rise in COVID cases in the late fall of 2020, the school had transitioned to remote learning with a full schedule of 80-minute class sessions. Students struggled with the long days—but not silently. Yadira, a senior, recalled, “For me, it was a hard time. I talked to my teachers about concerns I had. I self-advocated a lot.”¹

Yadira wasn’t the only student self-advocating. Students initiated conversations in Guidance class—Common Ground’s version of advisory—and showed up at the Student Leadership Team to weigh in. Fulcher said, “We are an environmental and social justice school. It’s our job to help students understand the steps you should take to make change happen. We really can’t empower you to do that out in the world and then not allow you to do it with us.” School leaders and staff took the issue up in staff meetings, and initiated a survey and phone calls with families and students to discuss options.

In December 2020, the school made a shift in the schedule so that Wednesdays became “What You Need Wednesdays,” where students had much greater autonomy over their time. On those days, students can opt into Wellness and Wonder workshops, set up one-to-one meetings with

¹ Students featured in this profile gave permission for their first names to be used.

teachers, join small-group work sessions, or use the down time to rest and recharge. (One student focus group for this profile was scheduled on a Wednesday for any student to attend. Student participant Emma commented, “We get to choose what activities we want to do, not what the school thinks we want to do or want to be. The people here chose to be here.”)

Adaptations like this have become common in K-12 schools across the country during the pandemic. But at Common Ground, the school has long shaped—and reshaped—its structures and priorities in response to student feedback. Now in its 24th year, the school is in a constant cycle of learning and testing, with students participating as leaders in that evolution. “This is my fourth year and I have seen the school change so much,” reflected 12th-grader Dayanara.

That habit of ongoing evolution makes Common Ground a good place to spot glimpses of what the future could hold for innovative high schools emerging from the pandemic. In particular, this school’s story is one of a community that has made student voice and leadership not only a philosophy, but an operational principle.

Common Ground High School at a glance

- New Haven, Connecticut
- Single-site charter school
- Part of a community nonprofit that also operates an urban farm and community environmental education center.
- Grades 9-12
- 234 students
 - 33% Black, 41% Hispanic, 22% White
 - 24% Students with Disabilities
 - 5% English Language Learners
 - 66% Free/Reduced-Price Lunch

An environmental and social justice school creating local changemakers

The idea that became Common Ground originated in the late 1980s among a group of educators, environmentalists, and community members in New Haven. In 1990, the group incorporated a nonprofit organization called The New Haven Ecology Project, and undertook environmental

education projects like service learning, teacher training, and a summer camp. By the middle of the decade, the organization had begun to reclaim 20 acres of abandoned park land at the base of West Rock Ridge State Park in New Haven, where its urban farm remains today.²

The organization remained a purely informal learning space until 1997, when Common Ground High School became one of the first charter schools to be authorized in Connecticut. From the beginning, students and teachers were deeply involved in shaping the school. “When I first arrived at this spot,

it was absolutely nothing,” reflected one of Common Ground’s founding students, Nichole Wells, in a video.³ “Students, we were Common Ground. We built the chicken coops, the pig pens, the goat and sheep pens, we made the gardens. . . . Everything you see out there, we built it.”

Core principles

- Extended learning opportunities (5+ years)
- Place-based learning (5+ years)
- Portfolios and exhibitions of student work (5+ years)
- Social justice focus (5+ years)
- Individual learning paths (3-4 years)

² <https://www.commongroundct.org/about/history/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1mxzBWZUUE&list=PL2IKYYNBP9CRTNkvmmJ4m-FrlbdlSHGzT>

More than two decades after the school's founding, Common Ground's leaders remain determined that students feel a sense of creative ownership of the school. Joel Tolman, Lead Teacher for Student Pathways, shows Wells' video to incoming 9th-graders every year. Then he asks them to look around and imagine what they might like to change. "My goal is to convince these incoming students that they can leave their mark—and that they get to choose how," Tolman wrote.⁴

That sentiment goes far beyond rhetoric. The school's 9th- and 10th-grade core curriculum, created just a few years ago in partnership with students and community members, explores essential questions about the Common Ground community, the broader city of New Haven, and students' roles as community members and changemakers. By graduation, all Common Ground students develop capstone projects and defend portfolios that define what leadership means to them.⁵ In early 2017, a survey showed that fewer than half of 9th-graders agree that their school experiences so far have inspired them to be a leader, create change, and advocate for others; but about four out of five 12th-graders agree.⁶ That showed Tolman that while there's still lots of room for improvement, the school is helping students see themselves as agents of change.

As a school committed to developing the power of young people, Common Ground relies heavily on a key ingredient: place. "We have this incredible 20-acre campus with an urban farm and a state park in the backyard," said Tolman. The space creates unusual opportunities for high schoolers to serve their communities: Common Ground's environmental education programs reach over 15,000 community members annually, and its thriving urban farm produces more than 10,000 pounds of local food each year.⁷

Adjusting in the face of a pandemic

For a school whose physical space is such an integral part of students' experiences, limited access to on-campus resources during the pandemic has been particularly painful—and has forced a new degree of creativity. "So many of the things that make Common Ground what it is are elusive or fragile in this environment," said Tolman. School staff have worked hard to maintain the core of what Common Ground is all about—and in the process, they've learned important lessons about the resilience of the school community.

"The pandemic has exposed deep and profound equity issues," both in the school community and in the world at large, said Monica Maccera Filppu, Common Ground's executive director. "We knew they were there, but I did not expect the way it played out in the pandemic specifically." When school buildings closed in the spring of 2020, Common Ground's community sprang into action. Classes were shortened, but Guidance sessions were maintained so that students could connect with their peers and adult advisors. Staff with in-person jobs, like campus safety and afterschool program staff, were reallocated to act as case managers to check in on families. Common Ground's urban farm delivered boxes of food to between 50 and 75 families each week.

⁴ <https://www.commongroundct.org/2017/09/can-9th-graders-change-the-world/>

⁵ The school's interest in developing student leaders doesn't come at the expense of academics and college preparation. The junior year core curriculum, for example, focuses substantially on SAT prep to ensure students are ready to apply to college if they decide to.

⁶ <https://www.commongroundct.org/2017/09/can-9th-graders-change-the-world/>

⁷ <https://commongroundct.org/about/history/>

Basic needs provisioning, according to Maccera Filppu, was only the baseline for what the school wanted to accomplish. “That’s the floor,” she stated. “Our challenge was, how do we help students make the most of this year academically? There are so many barriers to that.” Evidence from the spring suggests that Common Ground helped students clear those barriers. The school’s graduation rate, which has always been high, remained so during 2020: 95 percent of students received a diploma by the end of the summer. While administering standardized tests in the midst of a pandemic raises challenges and questions of reliability, results of the NWEA MAP also indicate that Common Ground students have made significant academic gains. Between fall 2019 and fall 2020, Common Ground’s incoming class grew more in reading, language usage, and math than 97 percent of their peers nationally—and that’s compared to pre-pandemic growth norms.

Partly because so much of Common Ground’s educational experience is predicated on being on-site, Common Ground opened again in the fall of 2020 with a hybrid model and a full schedule of 80-minute class periods. During hybrid learning, 9th- and 10th- graders attended two days a week, juniors and seniors one day a week, and Wednesdays were remote days for everyone. But in November, due to rising COVID cases, the school returned to fully remote learning. It was during this period that students began advocating for flexibility in the schedule, and the school responded by introducing “What You Need Wednesdays” to offer students much-needed flexible time.

The limited access to the school site throughout the fall forced leaders and staff to get creative—with some unexpected positive side effects. In one English class, students normally work on a project to analyze social determinants of health in the neighborhood surrounding Common Ground. This year, students are doing that analysis in their own neighborhoods. That’s created space for some unexpectedly rich—and vulnerable—conversations about the communities students live in. Likewise, Fulcher shared that the stripped-down remote learning setting has meant that conversations with students no longer default to what’s happening in their physical environment at school. “Since we’ve been remote, I’ve learned more about how students feel about things happening in the world,” she reflected.

Tolman also noted that hybrid and remote learning have spurred new conversations about student agency in classrooms. “Students have agency every moment of distance learning. You turn away from your screen, and there’s nothing an adult in that Zoom room can do about it.” That dynamic has challenged the school’s staff to lean into their commitments to nurturing students’ voice and choice. “As a staff, we’re talking about how to use the inherent power that students have in remote learning as an opportunity and a resource rather than a threat,” Tolman said.

According to Destiny, a senior, students have been actively involved in negotiating what the community needs to function well during the pandemic. After feeling sidelined in spring 2020, she said that things improved when “we discussed teacher and student relationships and how we should treat each other during this time.”

Nevertheless, one hard reality of the pandemic is that Common Ground’s newer students have not yet been able to fully experience the school’s physical space and resources. Luis, a 9th-grader this year, commented, “I just want this whole COVID thing to blow over so we can have more opportunities. It’s literally breaking my heart that I gotta spend my freshman year like this.”

In that heartbreak, Tolman and Fulcher see a silver lining: students love the school. Tolman reflected, “Our kids really want to come back. They talk about it all the time. We are united in a ‘gosh, we wish were together at school’ kind of way, which would have surprised me a year and a half ago because—well, they’re teenagers.” Fulcher shared that she’s surprised by the number of students who continue showing up, even given the stresses and barriers created by the pandemic. “Attendance is still an issue, but even students who don’t show up for class will still do the work. They’ll set up a one-to-one meeting on Wednesday, or come to a study hall in the evening.”

Innovation spotlight: Operationalizing student voice and agency

Common Ground’s leaders view their work nurturing student agency as essential to drive more equitable outcomes for kids. At a time when many educators are working to shed deficit mindsets about students that perpetuate oppression in marginalized communities, Common Ground is showing what it means to make asset-based thinking operational.⁸ Fulcher reflected, “Students know about things that I don’t. They’re a resource not only for their peers, but for me.” They’ve helped her, for instance, learn how to be more inclusive when representing many points of view in her classes and workshops.

Common Ground staff and students also know there is more progress to make, despite their evidence of success so far. Some students tend to naturally emerge as school leaders, while others need more support. As Fulcher noted, attendance has proven a challenge during the pandemic. And not all students naturally trust that the school authentically values student voices—for example, 9th-grader Jayden said he’s always thought that adults don’t care about kids’ perspectives. The school’s goal is to challenge that narrative, but there’s still work to do.

Here are seven practices that students, teachers, and leaders from Common Ground highlighted as venues for student voice and agency:

Leadership portfolios. All Common Ground students complete leadership portfolios as a graduation requirement. “This is a school that believes in the capacity of all the young people who walk through our doors to grow into powerful leaders, and to express that leadership in all kinds of different ways,” said Tolman. Chris, a senior, reflected, “I think of [leadership] as mostly involving other people and motivating them to move forward and follow the leader with confidence.” Yadira, also a senior, countered with a different idea of leadership: “I think leadership is about the little things, like listening to people when they talk.”

Guidance class. Common Ground’s Guidance class is a space for students to build strong peer relationships and discuss issues that matter to them. Ninth-grader Emma described it as “like a homeroom class but more productive. You’re not just sitting around. With COVID and everything, we’re trying to get to know each other even though we don’t see each other in person.” Emma described being selective about when to speak up in school, but “when I choose to use my voice, it’s sometimes in Guidance class, like when the teacher or other classmates ask for opinions on what is going on in the real world.” Guidance is also an important place for discussions about what’s working at the school and what’s not. Fulcher said, “Students can see that we take information and make changes based on their feedback.”

⁸ For one perspective on why deficit-based framings are harmful, see <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-the-deficit-lens-of-the-achievement-gap-needs-to-be-flipped-heres-how/2019/07>

Green Jobs Corps. In a normal year, Common Ground hires between 60 and 70 of its high school students through a paid program called Green Jobs Corps, which puts them to work in the school's programs and other local environmental nonprofits. "Paid entry points to agency are so critical," said Tolman. "Young people deserve to be paid for the value of their leadership, and they need compensation in order to meet their needs and their family's needs." For most students, the experience in Green Jobs Corps is their first time being paid for their work. (The school has also hired and paid students for other types of work, such as curriculum development.) Christian, a junior, said, "The jobs Common Ground offers can really help with [building] power and growing yourself."

Student Leadership group. In 2019, Common Ground changed its approach to student government. Dayanara, a senior, said, "We did have a student government when we were in person, and you had to get elected from your Guidance." But elected representatives weren't always fully engaged, while other students were shut out. The school switched gears to an opt-in afterschool program. "All you have to do is sign up, and you can get in," Dayanara said. "They just want students to come up and take ownership of their learning." When students identify an issue they would like to change, Fulcher, who is the group's staff advisor, helps the group identify the right staff member to talk to. "Usually the administration and staff members at the school are very open to ideas," Dayanara said.

Data systems and staff coordination. A staff Pathways team at Common Ground leads the charge for getting every student involved in opportunities to exercise their leadership and raise their voice. Fulcher, who is on that team, said that it's needed because student participation is still not ubiquitous: "Most of our opt-in opportunities are opted into by the same students. So we try to find the outliers—students who may not be engaged in what we're offering." The team relies heavily on spreadsheets that track who participates in what. "There's a lot of cross-referencing of what everyone is doing, and who isn't doing anything," said Fulcher. "Then we figure out what those students are interested in, and strategize about how to plug them into opportunities for leadership and voice in their areas of interest."

Educational Change internships. Every year as part of the course selection process, students can sign up to work with Tolman on initiatives to improve the school. Before the pandemic, Tolman charged these student interns with developing a visual representation of Common Ground's four-year school model from the student perspective, and used their work to inform the staff Pathways team he leads. Students in this internship also developed the school's end-of-semester course evaluation forms, and continue to administer and analyze them every semester. "I couldn't do my job without [these students]," Tolman said. The interns regularly host feedback sessions with their peers, which Tolman said have been essential sources of information about how students are doing during the pandemic. Dayanara, who has been an Educational Change intern, reflected that the internship was one key way she has been able to use her voice at school.

Student board members. The school recently created two seats on its Board of Directors for students, meaning that Executive Director Maccera Filppu is officially accountable to youth representatives. Yet especially during the pandemic, Maccera Filppu is careful not to overburden students. "With a real role comes responsibility," she reflected. "[During COVID] we have been thoughtful about giving students roles that don't have outsized responsibilities." For example, the two student board members were invited to the meeting in which the board voted to start the school year with a hybrid model, but excused them from attending if they didn't want to, due to the sensitivity of the issue. "I could have pushed [for them to attend], but it would not be fair to force them into a really difficult conversation publicly," said Maccera Filppu.

But practices like the ones described above are only part of the school’s recipe for nurturing student agency. Another ingredient, complementary and just as critical, is a school culture in which young people’s voices and experiences are respected. Maccera Filppu illustrates the adult mindsets that must be present for students to develop real power: “I have real one-to-one conversations with students, very adult conversations about equity, where I’m asking them for their authentic opinion. I think of them as just as capable of having real thoughts and opinions as any adult.”

That attitude is not lost on students. Emma, in her first year at the school, said, “My least favorite thing is when adults think they are more superior than us ‘just kids.’ But at [Common Ground] I feel different.” Dayanara, a senior, reflected, “I think the school cares about what students say. . . . I don’t think they would make opportunities like internships, or meetings like this one [the open student focus group session for this profile] “if they were not interested.”

Common Ground staff are proud of their students for navigating such a difficult year. Fulcher said, “So much of what was going on in students’ lives prior to COVID has been amplified in negative ways, but we have students still actively engaged in what we’re trying to do and what they want to learn.”

Conclusion

As the Common Ground community reflects on how the lessons they’ve learned will impact the school’s future, so too can their example spark conversations in other school communities. For communities seeking to nurture student agency and leadership post-pandemic, consider the following questions inspired by Common Ground students:

1. Twelfth-grader Yadira said that she self-advocated a lot during the pandemic, and Common Ground was able to receive student feedback and respond. **What systems might high schools establish to encourage, solicit, and act on student feedback?**
2. Eleventh-grader Christian said that paid jobs help students build power and develop as people. **What learn-and-earn models might high schools create to engage students in rigorous learning experiences that also give back to the community?**
3. Ninth-grader Jayden said that he hasn’t spoken up much at school yet because he’s been taught that adults don’t care what kids have to say. **What strategies might high schools employ to shift toward a culture that values student voice?**

About the Author

Chelsea Waite is a research fellow at the Christensen Institute, where she analyzes how innovation theory can inform the evolution of student-centered learning and the advancement of student agency. As part of this work, she leads the Canopy project, a collaborative effort to build better collective knowledge about school innovation.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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