



# COMMON GROUND

HIGH SCHOOL, URBAN FARM, AND  
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER

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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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### **Common Ground Welcomes New Executive Director Melissa Spear**

November 23, 2009 –This week, Melissa Spear takes the helm at Common Ground High School, Urban Farm, and Environmental Education Center. As the organization’s new Executive Director, Melissa will lead all aspects of Common Ground’s work – with a particular focus on community engagement, development, operations, and program strategy.

“Common Ground is ready to step up as a local environmental leader, and as a national model,” says Frank Mitchell, Common Ground Board Chair. “Melissa is the right person to take us there. She has been a leader in Connecticut’s land conservation movement. She has led successful organizations and complex efforts, consulted on environmental practices with major corporations, and served in local government in her home town of Bethany. We are lucky to have such an able, committed leader.”

Before to joining Common Ground, Melissa served as Connecticut State Director and Project Manager for the Trust for Public Land, a national non-profit dedicated to conserving land as parks, farms, and natural places for people to enjoy. In addition to providing strategic oversight and managing the operation of the state office, while with TPL Melissa oversaw a number of high profile, complex conservation transactions that permanently protected over 1000 acres of farmland and open space.

Prior to TPL, Melissa spent 8 years working as an Environmental Management Consultant, Senior Program Manager and Operations Manager for The RETEC Group, an environmental engineering firm where she led the national Environmental Management and Sustainability consulting practice. Melissa has served on the Executive Committee of the Connecticut Land Conservation Coalition and is a member of the Steering Committee of the Working Lands Alliance. Melissa has a Masters in Business Administration from IESE, an international business school based in Barcelona, Spain, and a Masters in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. She is also a Planning and Zoning Commissioner in her hometown of Bethany, where she lives with her husband Roger, their four children and her mother.

A national search for a new Executive Director began in May when Oliver Barton, Common Ground’s former Director and one of the organization’s founders, announced that he would be leaving to become Principal of Old Saybrook High School. Liz Cox, Common Ground’s Dean

of Students, took over as the Director of Common Ground High School, and will continue to lead the school moving forward.

“We considered more than 75 credible candidates for the position,” says Mitchell. “We took our time, because we wanted to find the right leader for Common Ground. We liked the combination of deep management experience, commitment to environmental issues, and strong Connecticut roots that Melissa brought to the table. She’s an alumna of the Yale Forestry School, and knows the state well, but also brings a genuinely new point of view to Common Ground.”

Melissa joins Common Ground at a time of significant growth. After two years of double-digit test score gains, this fall Common Ground became the state’s only high school to exit In Need of Improvement status under No Child Left Behind. Simultaneously, participation in Common Ground’s community environmental programs continued to grow significantly, reaching nearly 7,000 children, families, and adults last year – a 300% increase over the last five years. Growing interest and academic success has gone hand-in-hand with improvements in Common Ground’s physical site; in the past year, Common Ground has built a new Community Commercial Kitchen, expanded its Farmhouse Environmental Learning Center, and grown over 5000 pounds of produce on its urban farm.

**About Common Ground.** Common Ground is:

- An environmental education center, offering programs that connect people of all ages with the natural world.
- Connecticut’s only charter high school focused on the environment, preparing students for both success in college and environmental leadership.
- An urban demonstration farm, modeling practices of sustainable agriculture and contributing to a healthy food system for New Haven residents.
- A 20-acre laboratory for environmental research, sustainable living, the study of natural and human history, and community-building.

As a whole, Common Ground is a center for environmental learning and leadership located in New Haven, CT. On our 20-acre site at the base of West Rock Ridge, a diverse community of children, young people, and adults cultivate habits of healthy living and sustainable environmental practice.

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