

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

Accountability and Support Committee

Wednesday, February 4, 2026

450 Columbus Blvd
Plaza North, Hearing Room J
Hartford, Connecticut

Draft Meeting Minutes
(Approved on: _____)

I. Call to Order

Pursuant to the notice filed with the Secretary of the State, and with the interim absence of Committee Chair Erin D. Benham, Committee Chairperson Pro Tempore Kristen A. Record. called the meeting to order at 3:33 p.m.

Committee

Members Present:

Donald F. Harris, Jr.
Kristen A. Record
Dr. Seth D. Zimmerman

Committee

Members Absent:

Erin D. Benham

CSDE Staff Present:

Dr. Melissa Jenkins
Dr. Charles Hewes
Shakira Jacobs-Vazquez
Anika Matin
Jennifer Webb
Amanda Baksa
Ruby Rodriguez

Guests Present:

- John Scalice, Chief Executive Officer, Great Oaks, Bridgeport
- Latoya Hubbard, Chief Financial Officer, Great Oaks, Bridgeport
- Chris Pellegrino, High School Principal, Great Oaks, Bridgeport
- Denise Linares, Middle School Principal, Great Oaks, Bridgeport
- Dr. Karen Francis-Barnes, Humanities Director, Great Oaks, Bridgeport
- Kay-Ann Hewell-Walker, STEM Director, Great Oaks, Bridgeport
- Robert Carlson, Board Chair, Great Oaks, Bridgeport
- Monique Frasier, School Director, Common Ground High School, New Haven
- Genevive Walker, Executive Director, Common Ground High School, New Haven
- Joel Tolman, Director Community Engagement, Common Ground High School, New Haven
- Liz Cox, Chair of the School Committee, Common Ground High School, New Haven

II. Approval of Minutes

Harris, Jr. moved, and Zimmerman seconded, that the Committee approves the minutes of December 10, 2025, Accountability and Support Committee meeting.

Vote:

In Favor: Harris, Jr., Zimmerman, and Record
Abstained: 0
Opposed: 0
Absent: Benham

III. Charter Schools Renewal Corrective Action Plan Update:

Great Oaks, Bridgeport

Dr. Jenkins began the meeting by introducing Great Oaks charter school. Opened in 2014 with a mission to prepare students for college through high-dose tutoring, quality instruction, and an unwavering focus on career and college readiness. Today, Great Oaks serves 662 students in one of our most culturally rich and economically diverse communities.

Board Chair Robert Carlson opened for Great Oaks by describing the board composition including lawyers, a retired education professional, a teacher, a sociologist, and representative from the City of Bridgeport. The board is highly active in participation, with strong communication. He mentioned the board's goal is to set policy and make sure leadership has what they need. He expressed pride in the entire team.

Chief Executive Officer John Scalice explained that a major strategy this year has been the transference of work, making sure students are taking ownership—not just being compliant but embodying their work. He explained how Great Oaks switched to i-Ready 2.5 years ago, initially as a pilot and then full course over the last two years for two reasons. First, teachers were able to access the data easily and turn it over quickly. Secondly, students were already familiar with this program as

it is used throughout the Bridgeport Public Schools District. The shift was painless, but the data has been rewarding.

The i-Ready benchmarks revealed that incoming students often arrive significantly below grade level, yet the school has achieved consistent growth of 1 to 1.3 years annually, supported by high-dosage tutoring and an internally developed fellowship program called the “Bridgeport Fellowship for Urban Equity Education”, which was created due to Great Oaks no longer being under a Charter Management Organization (CMO) and losing their AmeriCorps grant. This fellowship allowed them to maintain their tutor program and continue to do work that positively impacts participation and education at Great Oaks.

Mr. Pellegrino and Ms. Linares go on to discuss chronic absenteeism and how to improve student outcomes, students need to be physically present in the classrooms. Post pandemic they saw a major increase in students not attending school. In 2024-25, the district landed around 31 to 33 percent chronically absent. They are pleased to report that on November 30, a poll collecting data regarding chronic absenteeism showed they were at 19.85 percent, which indicates a 36.5 percent improvement in students deemed chronically absent, though recent illnesses have raised it slightly. To improve chronic absenteeism, Great Oaks made an investment to hire a district-wide attendance coordinator heavily focused on making sure students are in the building. They also increased counseling by hiring more social workers. With additional staff, they can carry out strategies that include daily family outreach, home visits, and engagement initiatives to better understand why the child has not attended school.

Ms. Hubbard shared that, because of the national teacher shortage, securing teacher certification has been an ongoing challenge, especially in high-need areas like science and math, which continue to present staffing difficulties district-wide and state-wide. She was pleased to share that in spite of these challenges, Great Oaks is at 97 percent of teachers certified. They have 2 teachers in the final review stages to meet teacher certification. They were able to tackle this challenge because their internal program served as a teacher pipeline. There’s a large number of tutors who come into the program, end up becoming teachers in residence, and then transition into teaching roles. Additionally, the school has improved their onboarding process by creating transparency in the certification process and what requirements are needed for a non-certified teacher to become certified. They are on track to achieve full teacher certification by the end of the month, with only two teachers pending.

Dr. Francis-Barnes provided insight on understanding the data and how they began to look at their instructional framework and ask how they can improve learning instruction and better support students. Over the past few years, there has been a heavy emphasis on teacher clarity and the idea that students deserve to know not only what it is they’re going to be learning but how they have achieved those skills, and what it means. Another area teachers have been working on is students asking and being asked more complex questions and ensuring students have a voice when talking with their peers and when talking in a whole group with the teacher running the classroom. While working on these strategies with students in grades 6-8, the school has seen improvements in vocabulary and comprehension rates. Vocabulary proficiency has risen from 4 percent in 2022 to twenty-four percent in 2024 and the comprehension rate has gone up from 7 percent to twenty percent in 2024. Great Oaks acknowledged progress in these areas but emphasized that improving ELA remains a priority.

Ms. Hewell-Walker emphasized the importance of reading and the integral role reading plays in math because they need to be able to read in order to understand what the question is asking them to do. She goes on to explain that the math curriculum they currently have is exploratory. In middle school, they have middle school math and in high school, they have illustrative mathematics. This is new to the students and a shift for the teachers because they are in a position where they are releasing their thinking to students. It has taken them three years to get where they are today, work still needs to be done and they are focused on problem solving. Regarding problem solving, when looking at the numbers and operations domains for SBAC, there's been an increase from 7 percent to 62 percent proficiency. In measurement and data growth, they have seen a 62 percent proficiency. Another skill that was implemented to assist with closing the gaps in grades 6-8 is prerequisite skill instruction. Prior to starting a new lesson, they are looking at the prerequisite skill that the students would need to know to immerse themselves in this standard. The teachers must unpack those curricula and be prepared for courses.

High School Principal Chris Pellegrino outlined the school's priorities moving forward. Two strategies remain central: ensuring total participation in classrooms to strengthen student discourse and reinforcing learning intentions and success criteria so students understand what they are learning, why it matters, and what mastery looks like. These practices have already shown positive impact on academic growth, attendance, and school culture. The most urgent focus is shifting teacher mindset from compliance to ownership—moving beyond “doing it because it's required” to embracing these strategies as drivers of instructional improvement. While progress is evident, some teachers need additional support to fully internalize this shift. A significant change that has improved both teacher and student growth is ending the assumption that planning alignment guarantees classroom execution. Great Oaks has restructured its walkthroughs and coaching cycles to ensure support is tailored to what teachers' need in practice, rather than relying solely on lesson plans. This adjustment has removed barriers and allowed coaching to be more effective and responsive to real classroom conditions.

During the discussion, committee members sought clarification on the data comparisons presented by Great Oaks. The school explained that it operates as a single 6–12 district under one charter code, which means accountability measures apply across all grades. This realization was significant for teachers, reinforcing that they are evaluated on every category as a unified school. Attendance was a major focus. Members inquired about chronic absenteeism, noting the November rate of 19 percent and asking who conducts home visits. Great Oaks confirmed that administrators, the attendance coordinator, and social workers handle these visits, often in pairs. Current absenteeism stands at approximately 22 percent, partly due to a flu outbreak. The school also shared progress on securing busing for high school students; a longstanding challenge now moving toward resolution.

Further questions addressed grade-level trends, with Great Oaks identifying 10th grade as the cohort most affected by chronic absenteeism. Of 80 enrolled students, about 75 were flagged, with 30 considered high risk. The school attributed this to historical patterns and barriers such as lack of sports and community connections and is analyzing multi-year absenteeism data to inform interventions.

Committee members asked how chronic absenteeism impacts credits and transcripts. Great Oaks explained that students receive an “NC” (No Credit) but can recover seat time through Saturday sessions, summer school, or an H block class offered after school. This safety net allows students to

retake failed courses within the same semester; a system evolved from their former trimester model and now aligned with dual-credit opportunities through Post University.

The discussion also highlighted teacher certification improvements. Members praised the near-100% percent certification rate and asked about sustainability. Great Oaks outlined strategies including proactive recruitment at statewide job fairs, internal pipelines through its fellowship program, and strong retention efforts supported by leadership development opportunities and grants. The school emphasized its commitment to building trust and career pathways, which has reduced turnover and strengthened staff stability.

Board Chair Robert Carlson closed by affirming the board's deep sense of responsibility and pride in the school's progress, noting the culture of commitment and accountability that has developed over the years.

Common Ground High School, New Haven

Dr. Jenkins introduced Common Ground High School, which opened in 1997 as Connecticut's urban farm and environmental education center. With this mission at its core; to graduate students with the knowledge, skills, and understanding to thrive, nearly three decades later they are still serving that vision. They serve 221 students in grades 9-12 and are approved to serve 230 students, the school faces persistent challenges in chronic absenteeism, academic performance in ELA and math, and certification.

Executive Director Genevieve Walker opened by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to present and share Common Ground's progress. She emphasized the value of discussing the school's "boots-on-the-ground" strategies and assured the Committee that there is no shortage of effort, care, or dedication across the organization. Walker noted that the Committee would hear a comprehensive overview of the actions being taken to address the challenges outlined by Dr. Jenkins.

School Director Monique Frasier shared that the school uses NWEA to measure student outcomes. She outlined the school's priorities for improvement based on recent data and ongoing challenges. While overall ELA and math performance fell below targets, winter benchmark scores provided more accurate insights after implementing stricter testing conditions. These adjustments, including structured cohorts and shortened make-up windows, have increased confidence in the data and demonstrated growth trends, particularly in math for grade 10 and 11 students.

Moving forward, Common Ground will continue leveraging instructional coaching as a key driver of improvement. The school has implemented the SHARE observation tool to capture classroom practices and inform coaching cycles, ensuring feedback is data-driven and focused on student engagement and learning outcomes. Weekly grade-level and vertical team meetings will remain central to fostering collaboration and aligning instruction.

Strengthening MTSS processes is another priority, especially for high-need students who represent a significant portion of the population. Recent efforts include reinstating in-school math supports and co-teaching models to address foundational skill gaps. Professional development will continue to

emphasize data-driven practices and truancy interventions, supported by the School Improvement Grant (SIG) and partnerships with ACES.

Certification remains an area of focus, with 84 percent of staff currently certified and plans to assist remaining teachers through tracking systems and partnerships with teacher preparation programs. The school is also working to overcome financial barriers that hinder internal teacher development.

Attendance improvement is critical at Common Ground. Although chronic absenteeism has decreased from 45 percent to 37 percent; the school acknowledges this remains too high. Strategies include daily outreach, home visits, and building a positive school climate through student leadership opportunities and enrichment programs. Common Ground is committed to sustaining these efforts while exploring additional supports for families facing mental health and other challenges.

The school's next steps center on maintaining strong instructional coaching, reinforcing MTSS, improving attendance through engagement and outreach, and continuing progress toward full teacher certification aimed at creating a stable, supportive environment that drives academic growth and student success.

Committee members expressed appreciation for the progress reflected in recent reading and math scores but raised concerns about chronic absenteeism, which remains a significant challenge. They confirmed that students who are chronically absent are included in the testing pool and discussed how testing conditions were tightened this year to ensure more accurate results. Participation improved from fall to winter, with 196 students completing both ELA and math assessments.

The discussion focused heavily on attendance. Committee members asked what steps the school is taking to address the 48.1 percent chronic absenteeism rate reported earlier in the year. Common Ground described a multi-pronged approach, including home visits, parent meetings, and outreach efforts to explain the impact of absenteeism. Many parents were unaware of the severity of missing multiple days, and these conversations have led to greater cooperation. Executive Director Genevieve Walker emphasized that while absenteeism has dropped to 37 percent, an improvement from 45 percent last year, it remains far too high. Families now understand the school's commitment to attendance, supported by outreach workers and community engagement during home visits.

Committee members sought clarification on whether absenteeism is concentrated in specific grades. Ms. Fraser explained that it is not isolated to one grade level; patterns often stem from prior habits and challenges such as mental health issues. The school is working closely with families and outside providers to support students, even when services require them to leave school during the day. These interventions have helped reduce resistance to make-up work and Saturday sessions.

Credit recovery was another concern. Members asked how students who miss significant time regain credits, particularly in sequential courses like math and science. Common Ground confirmed that while seat time is not restored, students can recover credits through after-school programs and summer school. Midterm transcripts reflect these gaps, which can delay graduation, it's one reason the school closely monitors ninth-grade progress and implements make-up opportunities during the semester.

Committee members reviewed comparative absenteeism data showing improvement: November rates fell from 42.8 percent last year to 36.9 percent this year, and December dropped from 45.5 percent to 37.7 percent. While trending in the right direction, the school acknowledged the need for continued effort. Ms. Walker stressed that administrators are using data at every level to guide decisions and interventions, ensuring that every student's attendance is closely tracked.

IV. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 4:55 p.m. The next meeting will be on April 28, 2026.

Prepared by: Ruby Rodriguez