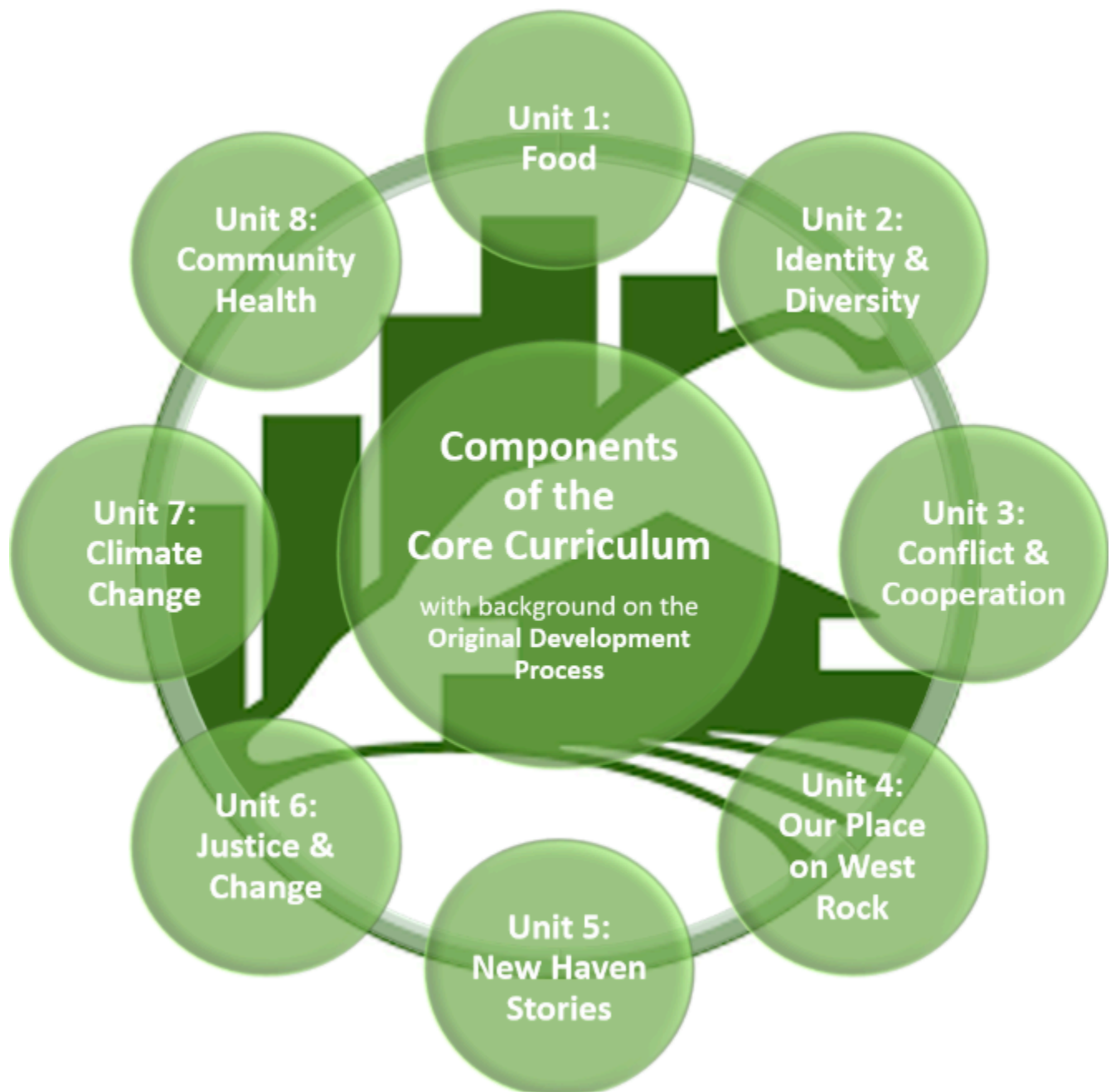




Core Curriculum Overview



Contents:

Components of the Core Curriculum	p. 2-3
Core 9, Interdisciplinary Units 1-4 Overview	p. 4-5
Core 10, Interdisciplinary Units 5-8 Overview	p. 6-7
Background: The Original Core Development Process	p. 8

Components of the Core Curriculum

The idea of the Core curriculum is to radically commit to interdisciplinary, community-based instruction, and to ensure that all students can access it so that everyone at Common Ground gets a foundational set of Environmental Justice experiences. No school has done this before or since. The entire curriculum and schedule of the school was changed to allow for 4-subject interdisciplinary courses that could flexibly group and schedule themselves and the whole grade-level of students. Several important components went into the development of the Core curriculum, as summarized below.

1. Custom Environmental Justice Curriculum as the ‘Foundation’ of the overall academic program at Common Ground

For many years Common Ground had a series of 2-subject interdisciplinary courses. But due to size and schedule in those days it wasn't possible for all students to take these courses. Some students got the custom environmental curriculum, some didn't, and it wasn't much of a choice or equitable. This meant that there was no way to sequence courses, or to scaffold skills or content from one course to another. Then, Common ground went through a transformative process revealing the need for social justice topics and themes throughout the curriculum. This led to the broadening of the school's traditional environmental charter to create our current Environmental Justice theme. Again though, there was no sequence of social justice topics or themes that all students received as part of their education, and no way to build skills and understandings over time. The Core curriculum attempts to sequence and scaffold key Environmental Justice topics and skills for all students.

2. Place-Based Learning

Common Ground has always embraced place-based education, but over the years and staffing changes there was a decline in place-based experiences. The Core curriculum attempts to establish reliable, intentional, place-based learning experiences for all of our students over two years. Students explore our own site and school community in Core 9, and widen their focus to the city of New Haven in Core 10. In each unit of study, multiple field work experiences allow students to build capacity to learn outside traditional classrooms. Fieldwork acts as a direct link to various parts of the community, which helps us teach and learn about our place, our city.

3. Project-Based Learning with Authentic Tasks and strong Community Partnerships

It can be difficult for an individual teacher to continuously use a project-based learning approach in successive units of study. The Core curriculum attempts to empower a whole teaching team to more effectively utilize project-based learning consistently, and to provide resources and logistics to accomplish culminating products or performances for real audiences at the end of every unit. These culminating tasks can be repeated, added to, and compared from year to year. To keep it real, each unit requires at least one strong community partnership, maintained and cultivated over time.

4. Highly-Effective Interdisciplinary Teaching Strategies

One of the most important Core development ideas was to use teaching strategies in common across the Core classrooms. Core teams would have the ability to collaborate around the development or adaption of highly effective, research-based, interdisciplinary teaching strategies. Through close collaboration of interdisciplinary teachers, literacy strategies shown to be successful in one classroom or with one group of students could easily be used in another. This saves time for teachers in development and trial in the classroom, and, more importantly, it saves instructional time (since students would have experience across several classrooms) and leads to more effective teaching and learning across the whole grade-level. Rollout of new strategies over time would also benefit through common professional development, fidelity to protocols, and accountability.

5. Common Planning Time

Essential to the idea of the Core curriculum is that the teacher teams have consistent common planning time each week to maintain topic and theme alignment throughout units, and to align teaching strategies and calibrate on models and exemplars of student work. Common planning time is also necessary to schedule and plan for the logistics of field experiences and partnerships, and for student supports and individual student needs. It's also useful for communication with school administrators, teacher coaching, professional development, etc.

6. Flexible time in the Daily Schedule for Field Experiences and Partnerships

A major barrier to field experiences and community partnerships is constantly altering the daily school schedule in order to pull students to attend those 'special' events. In an attempt to make the special more accessible and more common, the Core curriculum changed the daily schedule of the school to allow each Core to control a block of periods in which all students and staff could go 'off-bell' and create whatever alternate schedule was necessary without affecting any other courses. This attempts to create the flexibility necessary for all of the interdisciplinary experiences.

7. Opportunities for Students to practice Voice, Choice, and Agency

Giving students real agency is often difficult given the current state of the education system. The Core curriculum attempts to build agency by providing choice in the culminating tasks of each unit of study, consistently developing and practicing student voice in response to community challenges, and encouraging critical thinking and advocacy in our own school and in our city of New Haven.

8. Curriculum Experiences that help students explore Pathways to College and Careers

Often there is not enough time and space in a school's curriculum to connect with students' interests beyond the classroom and their dreams and plans for the future. The Core curriculum attempts to explore many post-high school pathways during each unit of study, providing students with opportunities to learn more about how to enter a field of study or career, and what life might be like down some of these many pathways.

Core 9 Interdisciplinary Units of Study - Grade 9

Unit 1. Food

As we begin the school year in harvest season, we will investigate food as a topic that connects people and their environments. Our current food system creates challenges for health and justice that need investigating. The local food from our own farm can help with some of these challenges, but we need to learn more about it, and connect with and celebrate the food stories all around us that are sweet and savory with learning.

Essential Question: How can learning about food teach us about ourselves?

Community Partner(s): Common Ground Farm, CG Food Justice Coordinator

Field Experiences: CG Farm Experiences, Compost, Cooking Demos, Fall Community Service Day

Portfolio Connection: Photos from Family Food Night, with paragraph reflection on the food or meal.

Biology	Health	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Cell Biology Microorganisms→Plants Photosynthesis Plant Cell Health/Stress Cycles of Energy/Matter Macromolecules, Human Nutrition	Healthy Eating, Nutrition Eating Disorders Food Access Food Fads vs. Traditional Diets Personal Choices	Food System, Foodways Agribusiness Advertising Big-Ag Environmental Impacts Food Workers Food & Culture	Food Stories Connecting Food and Culture Sensory language <u>Skills Focus:</u> Informative writing, discussion, elaboration

Culminating Product/Performance: Family Food Night, where students prepare and describe a food or meal that showcases all that they have learned about nutrition, the food system, food traditions/stories, and food justice from the perspectives of each course and academic discipline.

Unit 2. Identity & Diversity

Each year brings a new and amazing group of individuals to Common Ground. We explore our own identities and learn more about the people around us. As we uncover the beautiful diversity that surrounds us, we investigate what brought us all here in the grand, historical sense, how similar we may actually be, how to communicate with each other equitably, and how to celebrate each other.

Essential Question: How can we discuss and share stories of our individual identities to affirm and celebrate the diversity of our community? How does sharing our stories help us understand our community and ourselves?

Community Partner(s): Community members to be interviewed/share their stories

Field Experiences: Local biographical exhibits (?)

Portfolio Connection: Students practice writing a profile of themselves, sharing some aspect of their own identity or experience, and include a reflection on their Interview Project and Essay.

Biology	Health	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Genetics, DNA, RNA Human Heredity Genotype/Phenotype Evolution, Populations Classification History of Life	Gender, Sexuality Body Image Personal Health Choices Sexual Health & Reproduction	Personal Identity, Race, Gender, Sexuality, Economics, Ability, Age Researching Identities Interviewing	Personal Identity Stories Characterization Researching Identities <u>Skills Focus:</u> Reading for Understanding, Interpretation, Style

Culminating Product/Performance: The Interview Project and Identity and Diversity Essay; interview a person of choice to acknowledge or celebrate aspects of their identity/experience, then research a specific cultural group or social identity, focusing on integrating specifics of the cultural identity and the value of diversity. Present the experience during our Presentations of Learning and Leadership at the end of the semester.

Unit 3. Conflict & Cooperation

We explore the kinds of conflicts our students commonly encounter and the strategies for resolution and cooperation required to build community and peace. Students analyze the internal mechanics of disagreement and stress - including biological and emotional responses - while evaluating different kinds of conflicts to understand how disputes escalate. By shifting from opposition to collaboration, we equip learners with practical negotiation, active listening, and mediation skills to transform daily clashes into sustainable, cooperative solutions.

Essential Question: How can we resolve conflicts in ways that are peaceful and beneficial to all?

Community Partner(s): Common Ground Culture Team

Field Experiences: Peer Mediation Demo, Peer Mediation Training, Culture-building Experiences

Portfolio Connection: 1-2 academic paragraphs on personal leadership strengths and goals.

Biology	Health	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Animal Evolution and Diversity Animal Systems Homeostasis, Behavior Biological Reasons for Conflict/Cooperation	Healthy Relationships The Brain, Downshifting Identifying Conflicts Alcohol, nicotine, other drugs, Vaping	Group Dynamics, Identifying Conflict Cyberbullying and Digital Citizenship School Conflicts Conflict Resolution	Conflict in Romeo & Juliet & other Texts Language and Tone <u>Skills Focus:</u> Writing, Voice, Tone, Purpose Audience, Word Ch.

Culminating Product/Performance: The Peer Mediation Project, and returning to Homeostasis through Coping Mechanisms and Strategies; students learn about and practice various methods for de-escalating social situations and their own body's reactions to stress and conflict.

Unit 4. Our Place on West Rock

We have a very special place in the world and in our local biological and cultural ecosystems. We will explore and investigate our own farm, forest and school buildings. We will meet our own staff to learn how they interact with our unique place. We will use what we discover to argue for just and sustainable changes as our place, Common Ground, continues to grow and evolve.

Essential Question: How can we use what we have learned about CG to help this place continue to grow and change?

Community Partner(s): Common Ground Environmental Educators, Community Program Staff, Site Staff, Elm City, Katherine Brennen

Field Experiences: Common Ground's own site, West Rock Ridge & Nature Center

Portfolio Connection: Personal reflection on relationship with this place, Common Ground. What have you learned about this community? How does it connect to your own interests, identity, and future pathways? What do you want to be more involved with next year?

Biology	Health	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
The Biosphere, Biomes Biology on Site: Ecology, Ecosystems, Populations, Species, Succession, Biodiversity Humans & Biosphere, Impacts/Challenges	Keeping our place safe and healthy Resources available for health & safety at CG Mental Health & Wellness Outdoor mindfulness, meditation	History of CG, artifacts and student marks History of West Rock & the Nature Center Poor House, Public Housing, the Fence Waterway Interview Seniors Archive the moment	CG Env Mission: Hist of Environmentalism Silent Spring excerpts Read/Write short creative nonfiction <u>Skills Focus:</u> Argument, Topic, Claim, Audien, Evidence, Rhetorical Appeal, Counterarg

Culminating Product/Performance: Changing Common Ground: an Introduction to Advocacy, where students select a topic and advocate for growth and change or stewardship and sustainability at Common Ground by writing a proposal and presenting it to leaders/community members during PLLs.

Core 10 Interdisciplinary Units of Study - Grade 10

Unit 5. New Haven Stories

Core 10 begins by diving into New Haven's history and the waves of change and immigration that created our geography and current neighborhoods. We look at the physical features, ecology, and species of the Elm City, explore the 'model city' and urban renewal projects, and get in the field by visiting local neighborhoods. We research and narrate New Haven's stories in words, photographs, and maps, and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the people and the urban ecology around us.

Essential Question: What are New Haven's stories? How can we help to tell them?

Community Partner(s): Downtown Hosts, and Neighborhood Tour Guides, Integrate Fall Community Partner Fair as part of this project. Add org profiles to the map project

Field Experiences: Downtown History & Photography Experience, Neighborhood Experiences/Walking Tours: Fair Haven, Dixwell, Newhallville

Portfolio Connection: Selfie in the City: create a photo with you in it that connects to something you learned or to your identity/experience, and narrate the photo in a couple of paragraphs.

Environmental Science	Art	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Soils, Soil Health, samples from the city Building Healthy Soil Heavy Metals, Contamination, Lead Effects on the City	Intro to Art for Change Various ways to represent New Haven Intro to art forms and techniques Artistic Message	New Haven History Immigration and Neighborhoods Urban Renewal Housing Discrimination Gentrification	Sense of Place Stories Language and Power Writing about NH <u>Skills Focus:</u> Narrative Writing, Characterize Conflict, Elements

Culminating Product/Performance: Each course produces its own contribution to the story of New Haven using its own disciplinary tools. By the end, students have a multilayered and interdisciplinary view of the city and their place in it.

Unit 6. Justice & Change

We begin to reveal and examine various forms of injustice in our community and society, and trace those issues back to where we live, housing, and forms of discrimination over time. We also begin to internalize and practice effective inquiry and changemaking strategies to promote justice in New Haven and beyond.

Essential Question: How do we effectively call for justice in our community?

Community Partner(s): Changemakers/Orgs in NH, CG Artist in Residence, Elm Shakespeare

Field Experiences: EJ Tour, Fall Community Service Day: Working With Local Changemakers, Potential audience at Yale Peabody's MLK Jr. Day event

Portfolio Connection: Leadership Style Assessment. How do you want to use Changemaker Framework/Strategies to promote justice in the community on your pathway forward in life?

Environmental Science	Art	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Environmental Justice Classics: Love Canal, Dumping in Dixie, etc. Local Pollution Levels, Exposure, Rates NH Water Data Collection	Seeing & Representing Injustice around us Theatre of the Oppressed Prints for Justice, select a topic & send an artistic message	Housing and Redlining Policing, Police Brutality, Reforms Educational Inequities School-Prison Pipeline Opportunity Gap Generational Wealth	Housing Discrimination and its Effects Change Framework & Strategies Analysis <u>Skills Focus:</u> Rhetoric & Argument, Evidence, Language, Style

Culminating Product/Performance: Housing & its Effects, where students describe specific discriminatory housing practices, trace their historical implementation, and directly link them to at least two modern consequences such as the racial wealth gap, justice and policing issues, environmental health disparities, or unequal school funding in the New Haven community.

Unit 7. Climate Change

Climate change looms over our own community along with the rest of the world. We investigate the science and models for our area, migration scenarios, and scenes from climate fiction. Since climate change is such a difficult problem to take action on, we continue to explore various changemaker strategies to push our community leaders to act - now!

Essential Question: How might climate change affect us and what can we do about it?

Community Partner(s): New Haven Climate Movement, NH city officials related to Climate Change, CG Artists in Residence

Field Experiences: Hartford CT General Assembly Trip, On-Campus Climate Rally, Children's March with Elm City Montessori, Rock to Rock Earth Day Ride: Create an Art Exhibit/Experience

Portfolio Connection: Full Portfolio Reflection on field experience(s) and growth in understanding of the topic; photos with captions/narratives of participation in Climate Change events.

Environmental Science	Art	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Climate Science Greenhouse Gas Emissions Local Climate Models Air Quality Data Collection	Activism, Art for Change Climate Change Art 'Action on Climate Change' Pieces for the Core 10 Climate Expo	Current Climate Change Impacts on Communities Climate Migration Local Models Climate Politics	Climate Fiction, Parable of the Sower Climate Speech/Poem <i>Skills Focus:</i> Change-making, Personal Evidence & Voice

Culminating Product/Performance: Core 10 Climate Expo, where everyone helps create a community event on campus where we invite our school community, local change partners, local politicians and the press, to hear our message that change is needed now! Students present their art for change, their locally collected soil, water, and air quality data, their infographics, speeches, and more.

Unit 8. Community Health

We complete the Core with research into how to increase individual and community health in New Haven. We look at our own immune systems, the field of public health, our healthcare systems, and ways to promote health and wellness such as through art. Finally, we inquire into health disparities and equity concerns in our state and city before diving into research writing.

Essential Question: How can we make our New Haven community healthier for all?

Community Partner(s): SCSU Public Health (CARE), YaleSPH (helped develop)

Field Experiences: SCSU Health Careers Fair, Botanical Garden for Victims of Gun Violence, Special Health Instruction: Alcohol, Nicotine, other Drugs (ANOD) in the community

Portfolio Connection: Personal Leadership Reflection: What type of leadership are you going to bring to the community? How will you create environmental justice in the place that you live? Identifying Pathways and possible career goals.

Environmental Science	Art	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Intro to Public Health Human Immune System and Disease Prevention Greenspaces and violence prevention Assessing Community Health	Art for Healing Art Therapy Public Art for Community Healing Create a Piece Mental Health Comic Project	Healthcare System Health Insurance Debates Comparing Health Systems Understand Community Health Studies Health Disparities	Health Literacy & Health Info Online Formal Research on Community Health <i>Skills Focus:</i> Inquiry & Evidence-based Argument Writing

Culminating Product/Performance: Health Research Project, where students use inquiry and evidence to argue in writing for health improvements in our community, demonstrating scientific understanding of the issue and its effects, and understanding of policies that contributed to the issue or might lead to solutions.

Background: The Original Core Development Process

Developing the Core curriculum has definitely been an ongoing process, but there have been some notable events and trends over the years that are instructive and worthy of acknowledgement. What follows is a brief summary of the process from then to now for background and context, and for anyone interested in curriculum projects of this unique scope.

When the process began, all teachers, staff, students, and families were invited to provide input on relevant topics, themes, projects, and unit ideas in order to develop the content of the original Core curriculum, and so many of them did. Large sheets of paper were filled, arrows and stars were drawn, ideas analyzed, and themes were synthesized and voted upon. Community partners were called in to consult and help move ideas forward into plans; many also agreed to ongoing partner relationships and to host field experiences. Ideas, topics, and themes were vetted with other partner schools, expert teachers, theme coaches, etc.

From there, the original Core 9 teachers had to go from grand ideas to specific unit and lesson plans, and they did not have a lot of time to do it. The time pressure mounted as the team approached the beginning of the school year, and some of the interdisciplinary pieces, such as interdisciplinary unit plans, could not be finished in time. The team also began to grapple with logistical hurdles and the amount of planning needed to pull off interdisciplinary unit launches, field experiences, and culminating tasks with a whole grade level.

It is worth noting that Core 9 initially launched with Mathematics as a part of the interdisciplinary team. This had many interesting benefits and led to some really cool and relevant project-based math curriculum, but also came with many ability level and topic alignment challenges. It's also of note that while Core 10 was initially planned with Art in mind, for a few years it wasn't possible to staff the art position. So, Core 10 launched with 'Methods' as the 4th course, a support block in the schedule that tried hard to lean toward art whenever possible.

In general, it was difficult for the teaching teams to zoom out and think big-picture during the school year. With so much going on, and with teachers primarily responsible for their own units and lessons, it was an ongoing struggle to co-plan the interdisciplinary pieces during the year. But it was also difficult to co-plan during the summer - teachers needed a break after surviving the just-piloted curriculum. Developing the interdisciplinary unit plans and fully developing and documenting the interdisciplinary unit launches, field experiences, and culminating tasks became a perennial challenge for both the Core 9 and Core 10 teams.

A frequent example of this was that common planning time often became emergency lesson development time, as prepping for the next lesson had to take precedence over aligning on a theme or implementing a common teaching strategy. Thus the interdisciplinary curriculum development struggle often undermined parts of the vision.

With that said however, there was much success over the next couple of years with aligning and calibrating teams to work together on literacy skills. With the goal of scaffolding toward the SAT exam in 11th grade, both teams made progress on using common SAT-aligned rubrics for writing, building in SAT-like reading assignments, cold-reading, and using complex anchor texts in each unit. Common teaching strategies were used with more or less success, depending on the development challenges of the moment.

An important development trend that emerged in recent years was the lack of consistent formatting across the documented Core curriculum. In many cases, the original teachers developed unit and lesson plans using very different formats and had their own preferred planning styles. In some cases, this produced wildly different kinds of curriculum documents. This became problematic as soon as we started to have teacher turnover. Which, of course, is exactly what happened next as we entered the COVID 19 pandemic years, and Common Ground experienced many staffing changes.

Much was lost during the pandemic as we had to cut and convert everything to virtual or hybrid models, put all of the community partnerships and field experiences on hold, and much that was place-based could no longer be. Unit plans, lesson plans, and many teaching resources were also lost due to the confusion of teacher turnover, too many file locations, and institutional memory loss.

This overview document represents the next stage of Core curriculum development, as we try to reorganize, rewrite missing pieces, and build-out the interdisciplinary pieces toward the original Core vision.