

Audrey Keener – First Place  
11<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Bethel High School

Connecticut connotes grandiose images of marbled mansions, picturesque nature, and trust funds – an unattainable vision for those living in cramped public housing just a few miles away. Perhaps this dichotomy between the rich and the poor, between the 'haves' and 'have-nots,' is the state's most visible issue. An individual's place on this spectrum of material wealth, however, must not define their potential to grow into a well-reasoned, mature, educated member of society. This growth is fostered in schools, and it is imperative that these schools create a level playing field upon which all can build the foundations of a successful life. As an elected official, I would fight tirelessly to achieve equality of opportunity in education.

From the ideal of the American Dream to a cultural fascination with "rags-to-riches" stories, this United States is firmly rooted in the belief that any individual is capable of great achievement. The failure to ensure equal availability of educational resources is thus a threat to core egalitarian values. Connecticut's ability to maintain this equality is therefore integral to the preservation of democracy. Nonetheless, the state's educational statistics remain as polarized as its income groups – funding allocated to the Danbury Public Schools results in a spending of just \$12,828 per pupil, while nearby Redding is able to spend nearly \$10,000 more on each student annually. That \$10,000 difference affords invaluable opportunities that are simply inaccessible to students in other districts – with more funding comes more college-credit courses, greater counseling support, a larger quantity and variety of intramurals, and newer technology, all of which drastically enhance the classroom learning experience. The comparative disadvantages faced by underfunded school districts are exacerbated by the fact that many of the students in these districts are from underrepresented minority groups. With lower median family incomes and limited support from school resources, inequality of opportunity for such students has proven consequential – high school graduation rates for African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans lie at 78.8 percent and 76.4 percent respectively, falling below the 92.5 percent graduation rate for white students. Additionally, students of minority backgrounds are less likely to pursue a college education, revealing that inherent inequalities in the education system perpetuate discriminatory achievement gaps.

For such disadvantaged students, the education system should be an opportunity to challenge these disparities through self-betterment and freedom of intellectual thought – not a further obstruction of egalitarian principles. Through the eyes of a high schooler, these inequities are indisputable and inexcusable – participation in interscholastic academic contests has shown me a glaring juxtaposition between blazer-donning academy students and their casually-dressed competition, a juxtaposition that provokes a demand for justice in progressive-minded young individuals like myself. Reform and equality would thus shape my actions in public office. Reallocating funds toward urban schools, instituting scholarships for talented students of underrepresented backgrounds, and increasing the frequency of state educational equality assessments are just a few measures I would propose to encourage concrete progression toward the realization of democratic ideals.

Chloe Ashton – Second Place  
Grade 11  
Staples High School

During presidential elections, a vote in Wyoming has 3 times more value than a vote in Connecticut. Some experts compare modern voter values to the 3/5ths compromise used to dehumanize slaves. As we have been taught since childhood, democracy is the rule of the majority. So why has power been robbed from the American people based on the borders in which they reside?

The Founding Fathers constitutionalized the Electoral College because they were fearful that a tyrant would manipulate the public opinion and rise to power with a majority vote. This thought was rational at the time - the U.S. had just revolted against a tyrannical king. However, if one looks closely, they can see the truth behind this idea. Delegate Elbridge Gerry stated in 1787 that “The people are uninformed and would be misled by a few designing men.” The Founding Fathers rejected the idea of a popular vote because they felt U.S. citizens were not informed enough to choose any candidate other than a tyrant. Therefore, they put representatives in their place. The electoral college is a slap to the face and a condescending system.

Over the past 200 years, 700 proposals have been introduced to Congress to eliminate or reform the electoral college, more than any other subject. This is due to the nature of the electoral college itself. Every state is given a number of electoral votes based on population size. For example, Connecticut has 7 votes and California has 55. But, the vote distribution is far from exact, causing some voters to have more value. Additionally, if the majority of a state’s residents are Democrats, all of the electoral votes go towards the Democratic candidate and vice versa. The opposing party’s votes are wiped away as if they never existed.

This is not the only instance in which citizens are cheated out of equal representation. In the case of a tie, the presidential vote goes to the House of Representatives which is conducted on a one-state one-vote basis. So, Wyoming with a population of 600,000 would have the same value as California with a population of 40 million. Additionally, there is a chance of faithless electors who vote against their state’s decision. In 2016, 7 electors voted for a candidate different from whom they were pledged. Their promise to the citizens was broken.

Finally, more than 11% of the time, the winner of the popular vote has lost the election. This occurred in the 2016 election of President Trump. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by 2.8 million but lost the electoral vote by 74. Before the election, Trump stated “the Electoral College is a disaster for democracy.” Despite winning because of the injustice of the electoral college, he has not changed his mind. He knows that the voice of the American people is underrepresented. As an elected official, I, Chloe Ashton, would fight to assure that our voice is as loud as any other, because it deserves to be.

Sean Donohue – Third Place  
Grade 10  
Bethel High School

As an elected official, I would fight for the environment. There has always been a multitude of other, seemingly more imminent, issues plaguing both our state and country at large. Yet few hold the potential to be as catastrophic as humanity's impact on the Earth, left either unchecked or unchanged. Skyrocketing water temperatures and ocean acidification are already causing the wildlife of our seas to perish in droves. And forests, be they chopped down or burnt, are nevertheless destroyed dozens of acres at a time, resulting in the local animal species becoming hopelessly dislocated or deceased entirely. In short, radical and widespread action to deal with pollution can no longer be postponed. And as an elected official, I would have the position needed to enact this drastic yet necessary change.

That is not to say all of mankind is doing nothing in response to this global threat, though. Some of us do indeed plant our heads firmly in the sand, refusing to understand the frightening yet truthful conclusion that our situation is dire and only growing worse. But others have become activists in regard to climate change, advocating for reform all around the world. And there are also those that became elected officials, as I can only hope to now, putting into place legislation designed specifically to protect our planet. Connecticut's recent ban on plastic bags stands as a shining example of this, and of the positive change those in power can cause. As of now though, the environmental protection policies put in place by our country as a whole have not been enough to put a sufficient dent in the contributions we make to the gradual destruction of Earth's environment.

Our nation of over three-hundred and twenty million continues to consume non-biodegradable materials at an alarming rate, while the exhaust pipes of our cars and the monolithic smokestacks of our power plants churn out immense quantities of carbon dioxide that go on to violently suffocate our planet. So that is why I would focus on enforcing the use of cleaner materials and encouraging the use of cleaner energy sources if I were to be an elected official. And while it is entirely possible that this would be too lofty an ambition for just one person in government, I trust that there are others like me who will step up to help save the environment. Extreme change in the name of protecting our world is now inevitable and imminent. I only wish that I was an elected official so that I could make it come sooner rather than later.