

## Overview

In an attempt to increase student achievement in Connecticut's lowest-performing districts and schools, the Connecticut General Assembly has appropriated funds to support Alliance District and Priority School District grants. The goal of these grants is to aid districts and schools as they work to increase student achievement and enhance educational opportunities. This policy briefing focuses on the funding of these programs, and details the process Alliance Districts and Priority School Districts must follow to receive their grant funding, as well as the allowable uses of grant funds.

## Alliance Districts

### **Alliance District Funding**

Unlike the Priority School District grant, Alliance District funding is not allocated through a separate grant. Instead, Alliance District funding comes to an Alliance District as a portion of its town's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the Alliance District grant portion of the ECS grant was approximately \$307 million, or 14 percent of all ECS funding.<sup>1</sup> Alliance District funding is contingent on eligible school districts complying with the Alliance District program's requirements.<sup>2</sup>

The Alliance District portion of a town's ECS grant is calculated by taking the town's current year ECS grant and subtracting the town's FY 2012 ECS grant amount.<sup>3</sup> This means all ECS increases to Alliance Districts since FY 2012 are considered Alliance District funding for these districts. Additionally, Alliance District funds must be used to support new initiatives, rather than supplant existing costs.<sup>B</sup> Continuation of these funds over the 5-year period of a district's Alliance District designation is contingent upon the district's ability, on an annual basis, to adequately meet, exceed, and adjust its goals as outlined in its initially submitted Alliance District Plan. The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) may withhold funds if a district fails to comply with its Alliance District Plan.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, in FY 2024, the CSDE is required to withhold 10 percent of an Alliance District's FY 2021 grant that is above the district's FY 2020 grant. This 10 percent will then be sent to the Alliance District to be specifically used for the recruitment, certification, and hiring of racial or ethnic minority teaching candidates.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>A</sup> Originally published in February 2020, this policy briefing has been updated with statutory changes from the 2021 and 2023 legislative sessions.

<sup>B</sup> While this is not statutorily regulated, in order for a district's plan to be approved, the district must assure that "grant funds shall not be used to supplant funds normally budgeted by the local education agency (LEA)." Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d). 2018-2019 Plans. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Lists/Alliance-District-Approved-Plans/2018-2019-Plans>.

### **Eligibility**

Alliance Districts are local school districts identified as the 36 lowest-performing school districts in Connecticut. This designation is determined through a district's District Performance Index score, which is calculated using a formula that includes student proficiency levels in English/language arts, mathematics, and science.<sup>6</sup> The list of the Alliance Districts for the 2022-23 school year can be found in the Appendix of this policy briefing.

### **Proposal Process**

Every year, each Alliance District must submit a detailed plan to the CSDE describing how the district will use its Alliance District funds to improve student performance. These plans are known as Alliance District Plans. Before Alliance District funding is released, a district's Plan must be approved by the commissioner of the CSDE.<sup>7</sup> Approved Alliance District Plans must be posted on the CSDE website.<sup>8,9</sup> The CSDE reviews each district's progress toward its goals annually to determine whether the district is making sufficient progress for funding to be continued.<sup>10</sup>

### **Alliance District Plan Requirements**

In order to qualify for Alliance District funds, a district's Alliance District Plan must include objectives and performance targets that are, in part, based on student academic performance data. The Plan must also include strategies to improve student performance. According to statute, a district's Alliance District Plan may include, but is not limited to, the following strategies:<sup>11</sup>

- Tiered interventions for schools within the district, based on the need of the specific school;
- K-3 foundational reading programs;
- Additional learning time, either in the form of an extended day or extended year;
- A talent strategy to attract, retain, promote, and bolster staff performance in the form of performance evaluations or other indicators of success;
- Training for staff, administration, and teachers on different teacher evaluation models;
- Early childhood education provider coordination (such as HeadStart);
- Government and community programming for student support and wraparound services;
- Strategies to attract and recruit minority teachers and administrators;
- Enhancements of bilingual education programming;
- District-specific goals, such as improving bilingual education programming;
- Policies that improve the completion rate of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for grade 12 and adult education students; and
- Entering into the model school district responsibilities agreement.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the commissioner of the CSDE, at their discretion, may set any additional goals or include any additional categories, and may require changes to a district's Alliance District Plan prior to approving the application and releasing funding.<sup>13</sup>

### **Changes from the 2023 Legislative Session**

While lawmakers did not significantly alter the Alliance District program during the 2023 legislative session, new laws do impact program implementation and the future shape of state intervention and support. For FYs 2024-26 the CSDE will administer a pilot grant program for the purposes of embedding a professional chef in an Alliance District to assist school meal programs in building staff capacity, improving meal quality, increasing student diner satisfaction, streamlining operations, and establishing a financially viable school meal program.<sup>14</sup> The CSDE will award \$150,000 per year to five grantees for the purposes of this pilot program.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, the CSDE will submit a study of Alliance Districts to the Connecticut General Assembly by January 1, 2026. This study will examine the effectiveness of the Alliance District program at improving student success, the use and effectiveness of Alliance District ECS funds, and the accountability metrics used by the program.<sup>16</sup> By February 1, 2024, Alliance Districts must also each submit a report to the CSDE on the costs associated with implementing Family Resource Centers at each of their elementary schools.<sup>17,C</sup>

Lastly, the Connecticut General Assembly established the Building Educational Responsibility with Greater Improvement Networks Commission to study issues related to education funding and accountability for Alliance Districts, charter schools, and interdistrict magnet schools. The Alliance District portion of the Commission's study will feature the following:<sup>18</sup>

- An analysis of the Alliance District improvement plan process;
- An evaluation of the potential removal of the withholding of the ECS Alliance District grant;
- The feasibility of creating independent financial audits of the board of education budgets for Alliance Districts;
- The feasibility of requiring the boards of education of Alliance Districts to hold hearings evaluating any interventions or new programming established in the district;
- An evaluation of the possible establishment of guidelines for hiring non-classroom personnel; and
- A consideration for intervention that the CSDE may make regarding Alliance Districts.

### **Expenditure Reporting and Carryover Funds**

Alliance Districts must submit an annual expenditure report to the commissioner of the CSDE. If the commissioner determines funds were not spent in compliance with the district's Alliance District Plan, the commissioner may require the district to repay funds or may withhold funding in a subsequent year up to the amount that was not spent in compliance with the statute.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, if a district has funds leftover from one fiscal year, the district may carry over those funds for the following fiscal year.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>C</sup> More information on Family Resource Centers can be found at <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/FRC/Family-Resource-Centers>.

## Priority School Districts

### **Funding**

In FY 2023, Priority School Districts were allocated \$30,818,778 under the Priority School District Grant.<sup>21</sup>

### **Eligibility**

Priority School Districts are districts identified using the following criteria:<sup>22</sup>

1. The eight towns with the largest populations;
2. The 11 towns with the highest number of children under the Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) program plus the mastery count<sup>D</sup> of the town; and
3. The 11 towns with the highest percentage of children under the TFA program to the town's mastery count.

The list of the Priority School Districts for the 2022-23 school year can be found in the Appendix of this policy briefing.

### **Proposal Process**

School districts designated as Priority School Districts can qualify for specific grants in order to improve student achievement and enhance educational opportunities.<sup>23</sup> Eligible school districts are required to submit grant proposals annually to the CSDE for consideration of funding.<sup>24</sup> Currently, all Priority School Districts are also designated as Alliance Districts. As a result, the CSDE has created a combined application for Alliance District funding and the Priority School District grant, including the extended school hours and summer school portions of the Priority School District grant. Funding is awarded to districts after the commissioner of the CSDE has approved selected proposals.<sup>25</sup>

### **Proposal Requirements**

Proposals for Priority School District grants should include plans to improve student achievement and educational opportunities. At least 20 percent of each grant must be used for early reading intervention programs,<sup>26</sup> and the remainder of the funds may be expended on any of the following:<sup>27</sup>

- Creating/expanding programs related to dropout prevention;
- Alternative or transition programs for nontraditional students;
- Extracurricular programs that provide academic enrichment, tutorials, recreational activities, etc.;
- Developing and/or expanding extended-day kindergarten programs;
- Enhancing parent-teacher communication through the use of technology;

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<sup>D</sup> A district's mastery count is calculated by multiplying the grant mastery percentage of a town and the number of resident students in that town. Mastery percentage is calculated by dividing the number of tests taken by students who scored below the state average by the total number of tests taken. Grant mastery percentage is calculated in three parts: 1) taking the average mastery percentage of a town for the 1989 school year, 2) taking the average mastery percentage of a town plus the amount that this percentage has improved for the 1990-95 school years, and 3) the average mastery percentage of a town for all school years after 1995.

Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, §10-262f.

- Initiatives to strengthen parental and community involvement; or
- For purposes of obtaining accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (for elementary and middle schools specifically).

### **Extended School Hour Programs**

The CSDE separates a portion of the total Priority School District appropriation specifically for extended school hour programs in Priority School Districts. In FY 2023, Priority School District Extended School Hour Programs were allocated \$2,919,883.<sup>28</sup> These programs include academic, enrichment, and recreational activities and programming that take place before or after school, on weekends, and/or during summers and other vacations.<sup>29</sup> These programs are generally operated by community nonprofit organizations in cooperation with the school district.<sup>30</sup> These programs must take place in a public school building to qualify for the grant.<sup>31</sup>

The district's local or regional board of education must submit an annual application to the commissioner of the CSDE for each individual school program. Each application must include information on the program's:<sup>32</sup>

- Total hours of operation;
- Number of students that are served;
- Total student hours of service;
- Total program cost;
- Estimated volunteer or support hours;
- Demonstrated community involvement or support;
- Justification for why such a program should to be created, ensuring there are not already such programs in existence;
- Demonstrated need of the student body;
- Unique qualities that are exclusive to the program; and
- Committed responsiveness to requirements.

Furthermore, in grant applications, each district's local or regional board of education must:<sup>33</sup>

- Demonstrate it evaluated existing non-school hours programming, both in and out of public school buildings;
- Ensure there is equal program access for students with disabilities;
- Provide a summer component if the board is unable to prove that a sufficient one already exists;
- Include a program schedule and a total number of programming hours;
- Minimally support 10 percent of the cost of total district-wide extended school building hours programming; and
- Contract externally for assistance with the direct operation of proposed programming, unless it is clear there is not a cost-effective or interested provider to contract out to.

All extended school hour programs funded through this grant are expected to:<sup>34</sup>

- Offer academic support/enrichment as well as recreational experiences;
- Be open and accessible to all resident students in the district;
- Maintain communication with the student's teacher(s) and tie to curriculum the student's school uses;
- Have structured and specific experiences, but leave room for flexibility needed to accommodate individual students;
- Provide an opportunity for community involvement;
- Consider use of National Service Corps;
- Coordinate with existing programs that have a similar goal;
- Involve parents in the planning and execution of programs; and
- Provide opportunity for businesses to fund scholarships.

These grants in particular are limited to \$20,000-\$80,000 per individual school program, contingent upon school enrollment. Funding provided through this grant may only be used for direct costs, which includes hiring personnel. The use of grant funding for indirect costs is prohibited.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, schools may charge a fee of up to 75 percent of the average cost of participation on a sliding scale, based on the student's (and their family's) ability to pay. Schools may not, however, exclude a student from participating if the student cannot afford to pay for programming.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Grants for Summer School and Weekend School Programs in Priority School Districts for K-3 Students***

The CSDE separates a portion of the total Priority School District appropriation to provide grants to support summer school and weekend school programs in Priority School Districts. In FY 2023, Priority School Districts were allocated \$3,412,207 for summer school and weekend school programs.<sup>37</sup> District funding from this grant is based on the ratio of the number of resident students in the district to the total number of resident students in all Priority School Districts.<sup>38</sup> Currently, the CSDE has prioritized summer school grants for programs for students in grades K-3 who are substantially deficient in reading.<sup>39</sup> Eligible school districts must submit an annual plan requesting funds for a summer school program.

These plans must be approved by the commissioner of the CSDE, and should include:<sup>40</sup>

- Criteria for student participation, especially for students who are not proficient in reading;
- Criteria for teacher selection that emphasize recruiting teachers who have the skills specifically necessary to increase student achievement; and
- A system for reporting the number of students who attend the program, by school and grade, to allow for the assessment of the performance of such students and for the tracking of students throughout the school year.

The CSDE gives funding preference to summer school programs hosted by elementary and middle schools that serve students who are substantially deficient in reading.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Expenditure Reporting and Carryover Funds***

Expenditure reports are required to be filed annually with the commissioner of the CSDE. Any unexpended grant dollars at the close of the program, and any monies spent in violation of the approved grant funding regulations, are required to be returned to the State by the school district.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Changes from the 2023 Legislative Session***

Lawmakers did not substantially alter Priority School District grants during the 2023 legislative session, but they did extend the phase-out criteria for Priority School Districts that would no longer be eligible for grants. In FY 2024, any Priority School District that was in its final year of the Priority School District grant phase-out in FY 2023, will receive the same grant amount it received in FY 2023 for FY 2024.<sup>43</sup>

## Appendix

The tables below list designated Alliance Districts and Priority School Districts for the 2022-23 school year. The CSDE designates Alliance Districts every five years and identifies Priority School Districts annually.

2022-23 Alliance Districts <sup>44</sup>	
Ansonia	New Britain
Bloomfield	New Haven
Bridgeport	New London
Bristol	Norwalk
Danbury	Norwich
Derby	Plainfield
East Hartford	Putnam
East Haven	Stamford
East Windsor	Stratford
Enfield	Thompson
Groton	Torrington
Hamden	Vernon
Hartford	Waterbury
Killingly	West Haven
Manchester	Winchester
Meriden	Windham
Middletown	Windsor
Naugatuck	Windsor Locks

2022-23 Priority School Districts <sup>45</sup>	
Ansonia	New Britain
Bridgeport	New Haven
Danbury	New London
Derby	Norwalk
East Hartford	Norwich
Hartford	Stamford
Manchester	Waterbury
Meriden	Windham



## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.) ECS Entitlements broken down by Alliance and Non-Alliance portions. Available from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Fiscal-Services/Education-Cost-Sharing-Grant-ECS-MBR/Documents>.
- <sup>2</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Conn. Acts 23-208, § 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Alliance Districts: Overview. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Alliance-Districts/Alliance-Districts>.
- <sup>7</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u.
- <sup>8</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Alliance District Approved Plans. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Lists/Alliance-District-Approved-Plans>.
- <sup>9</sup> Conn. Acts 23-167, § 5.
- <sup>10</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 170, § 10-223l.
- <sup>13</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u.
- <sup>14</sup> Conn. Acts 23-167, § 6.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Conn. Acts 23-208, § 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Conn. Acts 23-208, § 4.
- <sup>18</sup> Conn. Acts 23-167, § 36.
- <sup>19</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (2023). eGrants Management System. Retrieved from <https://connecticut.egrantsmanagement.com/>.
- <sup>22</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266p.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266q.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266p.
- <sup>28</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (2023). eGrants Management System. Retrieved from <https://connecticut.egrantsmanagement.com/>.
- <sup>29</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266t.
- <sup>30</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Priority School District Grants: Overview. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Turnaround/Priority-School-District-Grants>.
- <sup>31</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266t.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (2023). eGrants Management System. Retrieved from <https://connecticut.egrantsmanagement.com/>.
- <sup>38</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265m.
- <sup>39</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Priority School District Grants: Overview. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Turnaround/Priority-School-District-Grants>.
- <sup>40</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265m.
- <sup>41</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265g.
- <sup>42</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265m.
- <sup>43</sup> Conn. Acts 23-208, § 7.
- <sup>44</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (2022). *2022-2023 List of CT Alliance School Districts*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from [https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/List\\_of\\_Alliance\\_Districts.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/List_of_Alliance_Districts.pdf).

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<sup>45</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (2022). *2022-2023 List of CT Priority School Districts*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from [https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/List\\_of\\_Priority\\_School\\_Districts.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/List_of_Priority_School_Districts.pdf).