

Introduction

There are a variety of types of public schools of choice in Connecticut, including magnet schools, career and technical high schools, vocational agricultural centers, and charter schools. Connecticut also has two additional school choice arrangements that are not as common: designated high schools and endowed academies. This policy briefing discusses both of these options and how they are a part of Connecticut's public education landscape. Included in this policy briefing is information about the objective, the history, the administration, and the funding of designated high schools and endowed academies.

Designated High Schools

Connecticut law allows for local boards of education to choose not to maintain a high school. If a local board of education chooses this option, it may form a regional school district or it may designate, through interlocal cooperative arrangements, one or more high schools maintained by other school districts as the public high school(s) of the town. Local boards of education that do not maintain a high school must pay the tuition of all resident students attending the designated high school,¹ the price of which is usually negotiated between the sending and receiving districts.² School districts sending students to designated high schools must provide transportation to the school(s) it designates local students to attend.³ Local boards of education that have accepted nonresident students may discontinue the arrangement with one year's notice, as long as it does not enter into another, similar arrangement with a different board of education for 10 years.⁴ Sending towns may discontinue the relationship with a designated high school at-will, or as delineated in the interlocal agreement. When a dissolution of agreements occurs, current students are often provided the opportunity to continue attending the discontinued designated high school until they graduate.⁵

Most school districts that choose not to maintain a high school designate between one and four high schools that students may attend,⁶ and provide information to parents about other choice programs in the area available to local students, such as magnet schools, vocational agriculture programs, and technical high schools. However, some school districts, such as Preston, also accept fiscal responsibility for students attending magnet schools in surrounding towns.⁷ In another example, the City of Norwich lists 10 high schools on its list of designated high schools, including technical high schools, magnet schools, a state charter school, and a free private academy, and agrees to pay tuition only to the schools where tuition is applicable. Norwich, however, does provide transportation to all of the schools on its list of designated high schools.⁸

^A Originally published on May 28, 2019, and revised in October 2020, this policy briefing has been updated with statutory changes from the 2021 legislative session.

In 2015, the Connecticut General Assembly's Program Review and Investigations Committee (PRI)^B analyzed data from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and performed interviews with officials in school districts that participated in designated high school arrangements. The PRI found that in the 17 Connecticut school districts that did not maintain a high school, 16 different high schools were designated for students to attend, in addition to endowed academies. The number of high school students sent to designated high schools from a single district ranged from 29 students in Union to 1,585 students in Norwich. However, the report suggested Norwich was an outlier, as it hosts Norwich Free Academy, an endowed private school, which is the primary high school for the town, while other districts that host endowed academies, Winchester and Woodstock, have smaller student populations. Outside of these three towns, the highest number of students attending designated high schools from a single sending town was 294. The report also found that most towns that did not maintain a high school were clustered in eastern Connecticut.⁹

The 2015 PRI report cited benefits of the designated high school system as:

- Allowing districts to realize similar benefits to regional school districts without having to undertake the bureaucratic process of forming a regional school district;
- Allowing districts to provide educational opportunities and achieve savings without sacrificing the agency to exit the agreement if the terms become untenable; and
- Allowing the parents of students in sending towns to exercise choice in selecting a high school for their child.

The report also cited challenges related to designated high schools as:

- Sometimes receiving schools will increase their tuition rates mid-year if an audit of the costs from the prior school year are higher than the negotiated tuition rate;
- A receiving school district can decide to no longer host students, as long as it gives one year of notice, forcing the sending town to find a new designated high school (however, this was not cited as a source of concern in interviews with district leaders); and
- Receiving school districts may have uncertainty regarding enrollment projections.¹⁰

Endowed Academies

Statutory Authority

One type of school that is commonly listed as a designated high school is an endowed private academy. Under Connecticut statute, the Connecticut State Board of Education has the authority to 1) approve an incorporated or endowed high school or academy and 2) require towns that do not maintain a high school to pay the tuition fees for resident students who attend the academy.¹¹ Ecclesiastical schools are not eligible to become endowed academies.¹² Endowed academies in Connecticut are classified as local education agencies by the CSDE for the purposes of reporting to the federal

^B The PRI was eliminated by the General Assembly in 2017 under Public Act 17-60.

government.¹³ Although privately governed and managed,¹⁴ in general, endowed academies must follow the same laws and regulations as public schools¹⁵ and are subject to school accountability reporting from the CSDE.¹⁶

History

There are currently three endowed academies in Connecticut: The Gilbert School in Winchester, The Woodstock Academy in Woodstock, and Norwich Free Academy (NFA) in Norwich.¹⁷ Each of these schools was founded in the 19th century and now serves as the designated high school for the town in which it is located. Each of these endowed academies also serves at least one additional town, although these towns may also designate other high school options for resident families. The Gilbert School serves Winchester and Hartland; The Woodstock Academy serves Woodstock, Brooklyn, Canterbury, Eastford, Pomfret, and Union; and NFA serves Norwich, Bozrah, Brooklyn, Canterbury, Franklin, Lisbon, Preston, Sprague, and Voluntown.¹⁸

Endowed academies predate the widespread availability of public high schools, which in Connecticut proliferated in the 1930s.¹⁹ For example, The Woodstock Academy was founded in 1801 and became the public school of record for the town of Woodstock in 1913,²⁰ while The Gilbert School has served the students of the town of Winchester since its founding in 1895.²¹ NFA was formed in 1854, after a movement to consolidate the 40 independent school organizations operating in Norwich in the first half of the 19th century.²² Statutes governing the authorization of free academies date to 1947, but it is unclear the exact point at which the schools became officially registered as the public schools of record in their communities.²³

Funding

Endowed academies charge tuition to the sending school districts of the towns they serve and these districts are required to pay the full amount of tuition.²⁴ Towns receive additional funding in their state Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grants for each student a town sends to an endowed academy. Towns receive \$100 for each student and each grade sent to an endowed academy. For example, a town sending 10 students to an endowed academy (four grades) would receive $\$100 \times 10 \text{ students} \times 4 \text{ grades} = \$4,000$. The Regional District Bonus is calculated prior to the ECS phase-in, which means this example town would not receive the entire \$4,000 prior to the ECS grant being fully funded. In FY 2022, the ECS formula contained \$1.5 million in total for all towns sending students to designated high schools. However due to the phase-in and a provision that holds harmless those towns scheduled for ECS grant reductions in FYs 2022 and 2023, the actual total Regional District Bonus for FY 2022 was \$65,708.

Each academy employs different practices when setting tuition rates. The Woodstock Academy has three tuition rates. Currently, towns sending their resident students to The Woodstock Academy pay an annual tuition rate of \$14,800 per student.²⁵ Annual tuition for day students (those who attend The Woodstock Academy but are not boarded at the school and are not sent by a sending district as part of a designated high school agreement) is currently \$15,500 per student. The Woodstock Academy also accepts private-pay boarding students whose tuition is \$51,500 per year.²⁶

NFA, which serves the largest collection of towns, has one 5-year agreement, billed as “the Master Agreement,” which dictates its tuition rates. Under this plan, NFA has agreed to limit tuition increases to 2.5 percent a year.²⁷ Tuition at NFA for the 2019-20 school year ranges from \$12,985 per student for its general education program to \$69,369 per student for certain special education programs. The City of Norwich receives a \$200 per-student discount for in-kind services the town provides the school.²⁸ These rates represent a 1.75 percent tuition increase over the 2018-19 school year.²⁹

The Gilbert School's tuition for the 2019-20 school year was \$15,506 per student.³⁰ The cost of private tuition is not made publicly available by NFA or The Gilbert School. There are not currently any restrictions on the amount of tuition endowed academies may charge school districts.³¹ Under the definition of “regular program expenditures” in the statutes relating to the ECS formula, the towns of Winchester and Woodstock are allowed to record as part of the current expenses of their public schools, the amounts expended by The Gilbert School and The Woodstock Academy, respectively, from each school's endowment.³²

The three current endowed academies are included in the definition of a “school building project” in Connecticut statute,³³ which makes the schools eligible for school construction reimbursements if the town in which the schools are located qualifies under standard school construction laws and regulations.³⁴ Host towns may issue municipal bonds in support of school building projects for endowed academies.³⁵ Endowed academies are also eligible for state telecommunications grants.³⁶

Additionally, beginning in FY 2022, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CSDE is required to distribute to endowed academies federal funding provided under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, to which the schools would otherwise not be entitled to, as long as it does not conflict with any federal law or U.S. Department of Education guidance, rule, or regulation about the ESSER Fund.³⁷

Governance & Endowments

Each of Connecticut's endowed academies operates under statutes and regulations that govern nonprofit entities as well as those that govern public schools. As with most private schools, boards of trustees oversee the operations and finances of endowed academies. NFA has a 13-member board of trustees, made up entirely of school alumni.³⁸ NFA also maintains the NFA Foundation, Inc., which manages the endowment of the academy.³⁹ In 2018, the NFA endowment was approximately \$76.4 million.⁴⁰

The board of The W.L. Gilbert School Corporation includes three representatives from the Town of Winchester and one from the Town of Hartland, and manages the day-to-day oversight of The Gilbert School.⁴¹ The W.L. Gilbert School Corporation ended the 2018 fiscal year with approximately \$8.7 million in net assets.⁴² The W.L. Gilbert Trust Corporation was founded by William L. Gilbert in 1895 and manages the endowment of The Gilbert School. In 2018, the W.L. Gilbert Trust Corporation listed an endowment of approximately \$6.5 million.⁴³

The Woodstock Academy is incorporated as The Woodstock Academy Corporation, which has existed “to maintain and operate a school and engage in educational enterprises in said town of Woodstock for the benefits of the inhabitants of said town and vicinity” since 1801 as a non-stock corporation. The Corporation meets annually to review the annual audit, which is produced by the Academy’s board of trustees, who are overseen by the Corporation. Although the bylaws for each entity are separate, the Corporation and the trustees form one organization. The trustees are responsible for the day-to-day management and oversight of the Academy and “all the property and affairs” of the Corporation. There are 30 members of the board of trustees. One-third of trustees must be members of the Corporation, and the local board of education from each sending town has a seat on the board of trustees.⁴⁴ The Woodstock Academy Foundation, incorporated in 2010, accepts donations on behalf of The Woodstock Academy,⁴⁵ and in FY 2018, the Foundation had approximately \$923,000 in assets.⁴⁶ The Woodstock Academy ended FY 2018 with approximately \$7.6 million in net assets.⁴⁷

International Students

Many private schools accept international students, who increase student diversity and who pay full tuition. An industry of admissions consultants has developed to support the recruitment and selection process in foreign countries, especially in China.⁴⁸ Connecticut’s endowed academies have tapped into this pool of private pay students, both as full-time boarding students and as day students.

The Woodstock Academy advertises a “flexible semester schedule” that allows students to obtain a “cultural experience” of one semester to four years.⁴⁹ The Gilbert School offers an International Residency Program, in which students’ families pay private tuition to attend the school. The school recently opened a dormitory to house male international students, and other students live with faculty members during their international residencies.⁵⁰ The Woodstock Academy enrolls approximately 17 percent international students, who support 40 percent of the school’s budget.⁵¹ In 2018, The Gilbert School announced a new partnership with Kings Education, an international student recruitment agency. Kings Education pays The Gilbert Trust \$36,000 per year, per student to provide room and board to international students, and The Gilbert Trust provides The Gilbert School Corporation with \$13,351 in tuition for each student.⁵² NFA’s website states it currently enrolls about three percent (55) international students, and refers parents of international students to a business called Northeast Student Consulting, LLC to apply for admission. NFA’s website also advertises a long history of enrolling students from mainland China, dating back to NFA graduates from the class of 1881.⁵³

The table on the following page shows Connecticut student and private tuition student enrollment at each endowed academy.

Enrollment for Connecticut's Endowed Academies, 2019-20 School Year

School	Connecticut Students	% Connecticut Students	Private Pay Students	% Private Pay Students	Total Enrollment
The Gilbert School ⁵⁴	441	94%	30	69%	471
Norwich Free Academy ⁵⁵	2215	97%	69	3%	2284
The Woodstock Academy ⁵⁶	968	89%	117	11%	1085

Student Demographics

Thirty-six percent of the 3,822 students educated at Connecticut's endowed academies during the 2019-20 school year were identified as BIPOC.^c Additionally, 10.2 percent of Connecticut's endowed academy students required special education services; 5.9 percent were provided English Learner services; and 36.3 percent were classified as economically disadvantaged due to their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch.⁵⁷

Recent Proposed Legislation

There have been two recent legislative proposals before the Connecticut General Assembly regarding the management and oversight of endowed academies.

A proposed bill, S.B. 874: *An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut*, from Governor Ned Lamont during the 2019 regular legislative session, which failed to gain passage, would have made a number of changes to the statutes governing endowed academies. Specifically, the bill would have:

- Removed eligibility of endowed academies to receive noncompetitive state aid, unless specifically provided;
- Required the governing boards of all endowed academies to include a representative of each local or regional board of education that sends more than 50 students to the endowed academy;
- Required the governing board of each endowed academy to publicly post meeting minutes and agendas for the board and its subcommittees;

^c The School and State Finance Project uses BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) to refer to individuals who self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Hispanic/Latino of any race; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; or two or more races. Individual demographic categories and data used in the visualizations above comes from the Connecticut State Department of Education. The acronym BIPOC is used in an effort to be as inclusive, succinct, and accurate as possible when using racial and ethnic demographics in our work. However, we know no single acronym, identifier, or label can accurately define an individual or fully encompass the rich diversity of cultures, heritages, and backgrounds represented in the demographic data we use. For questions or comments about the demographic terms we use, please contact us at info@schoolstatefinance.org.

- Required each endowed academy to submit its annual certified audited statements and its most recent Internal Revenue Service Form 990, including all attachments, to the commissioner of the CSDE;
- Required the commissioner of the CSDE to publicly post all financial statements and annual audits on the CSDE website within 30 days of receiving such reports;
- Required that before the governing board of an endowed academy adopts an annual budget, the section(s) of the budget that receive public funds are reviewed by the sending districts' boards of education and are subject to a public hearing; and
- Reduced the maximum reimbursement percentage for school construction grants from 80 to 65 percent.⁵⁸

During the 2017 regular legislative session, S.B. 786: *An Act Concerning Education Mandate Relief and the Transparency of Endowed Academies*, passed out of the General Assembly's Education Committee and was adopted by the State Senate but was not called in the House of Representatives.⁵⁹ This bill, which was originally proposed by then-Governor Dannel Malloy, contained a number of provisions identical to Governor Lamont's 2019 bill, and would have made the following changes to statutes governing endowed academies:

- Required each endowed academy to submit its annual certified audited statements and its most recent Internal Revenue Service Form 990, including all attachments, to the commissioner of the CSDE;
- Required the commissioner of the CSDE to publicly post all financial statements and annual audits on the CSDE website within 30 days of receiving such reports; and
- Required that before the governing board of an endowed academy adopts an annual budget, the section(s) of the budget that receive public funds are reviewed by the sending districts' boards of education and are subject to a public hearing.⁶⁰

NFA submitted testimony for the March 6, 2017 public hearing on S.B. 786 opposing the new transparency measures, especially those requiring public representation on its board of trustees. NFA maintains it has transparent business practices and that its independent status allows it to remain focused on its mission, avoiding political or personal influences.⁶¹ In 2019, NFA released a statement stating it was "vigorously opposed" to Governor Lamont's proposal (S.B. 874).⁶² The Gilbert School and The Woodstock Academy also submitted testimony opposing the legislation with their criticism focused on the removal of eligibility for state aid, while still subjecting each endowed academy to all statutes pertaining to the provision of public schools.⁶³

Endnotes

¹ Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-33.

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⁴ Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-35.

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²³ Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-34.

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- ³³ Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 173, § 10-282.
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