The Alliance District program is one way the State of Connecticut approaches school improvements to aid student achievement. The Alliance District program aims to transform the educational experiences and outcomes of students in Connecticut's lowest-performing school districts by providing additional resources and increased accountability.[1]

History and Timeline of the Alliance District Program

2012: 30 of Connecticut's lowest performing students were designated as Alliance Districts with the enactment of Public Act 12-116. During this period, student achievement was measured in two ways: the District Performance Index (DPI) and the School Performance Index (SPI).[2] Districts were designated as Tier II (Alliance) or Tier III (Opportunity) districts and were to be provided appropriate support based on how each district and school performed.

2015: The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law, and new requirements were established for statewide accountability systems.[3] Under ESSA, states were given more autonomy in creating accountability standards that holistically measured student success.[4] At this time, Connecticut combined its Tier II and Tier III districts to develop the Alliance District program.[5]

2017: Public Act 17-2 (June Special Session) was passed, which reauthorized the Alliance District program for an additional five years and expanded the program from 30 to 33 Alliance Districts.[6] Most recently, Public Act 22-118 reauthorized and expanded the Alliance District program again, increasing the number of districts participating in the program from 33 to 36.[7]

2023: Public Act 23-208 was passed, requiring the commissioner of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to draft a report on the overall effectiveness of the Alliance District program to the General Assembly by no later than January 1, 2026. This report is also supposed to make recommendations on how to improve the Alliance District program and decrease the number of Alliance Districts by July 1, 2027.[8]

2023: Public Act 23-167 was passed, which authorized the establishment of the Building Educational Responsibility with Greater Improvement Network (BERGIN) Commission. The Commission was charged to conduct a study on issues related to education funding for local and regional boards of education, charter schools, and operators of interdistrict magnet school programs; accountability measures for Alliance Districts, charter schools, and interdistrict magnet school programs; the adequacy of financial reporting by local and regional boards of education; and the financial impact of interdistrict magnet school programs, charter schools, and statewide interdistrict public school attendance programs on local and regional boards of education.

The focus of the Alliance District portion of this study is to: analyze the process of how boards of education develop Alliance District plans, examine whether the withholding provisions of the Alliance District program aid should be removed, determine if creating independent financial audits of expenditures is feasible, determine if requiring Alliance District boards of education to hold hearings on interventions is achievable, consider the establishment of guidelines for hiring non-classroom personnel, and consider interventions the CSDE can take concerning the operations of an Alliance District by January 15, 2025.[9,A]

What is an Alliance District?

Alliance Districts are defined as the 33 lowest-performing local and regional public school districts in Connecticut based on the state's Next Generation Accountability System (NGAS). The NGAS is composed of 12 indicators that show how well a district or school is performing academically and how well it is preparing students for success both inside and outside of the classroom.[10,11]

However, due to legislation, there are currently 36 Alliance Districts. This is due to statutory language that allows any school district previously designated as an Alliance District between fiscal year 2013 and FY 2022 to remain in the Alliance District program.[12] This means that even if an Alliance District has improved and is no longer among the 33 lowest-performing districts, it may still be considered an Alliance District and remain part of the Alliance District program.

Alliance District Program Eligibility[13]

1. Any local or regional public school district with a minimum of 1,000 students in the same data year as the Accountability Index.

2. May not be one of the following:
   - Connecticut Technical High School;
   - Endowed Academy;
   - Public charter school;
   - Regional Educational Service Center; or
   - Unified School District.

3. District must be one of the 33 lowest-performing districts based on the Accountability Index OR if outside of the 33 lowest-performing districts, be a district that was designated an Alliance District from June 30, 2013 - June 30, 2017.


Once designated as an Alliance District, districts must complete and submit an annual Alliance District Plan to the commissioner of the CSDE, make progress in the areas outlined in their Plan, and comply with any requirements as outlined by the commissioner.[14]

Alliance District Demographics

Alliance Districts educate a combined 227,273 students, which represents 44.3% of all Connecticut public school students.[15] An increasing share of Connecticut's highest-need students are educated in districts participating in the Alliance District program, with 60.5% of the state's students who designated as "High Needs,"[B] and 63.2% of Connecticut's BILPOC[C] students,[16] attending a district that is part of the Alliance District program.

On an individual basis, 35 of the state's 36 Alliance Districts have a higher percentage of "High Needs" students than the state as a whole. Additionally, 34 Alliance Districts have a higher percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 30 have a higher percentage of students with disabilities, 27 have a higher percentage of BILPOC students, and 17 have a higher percentage of multilingual learners.[17]

Chart 1: Percentage of Students by Designated Subcategory
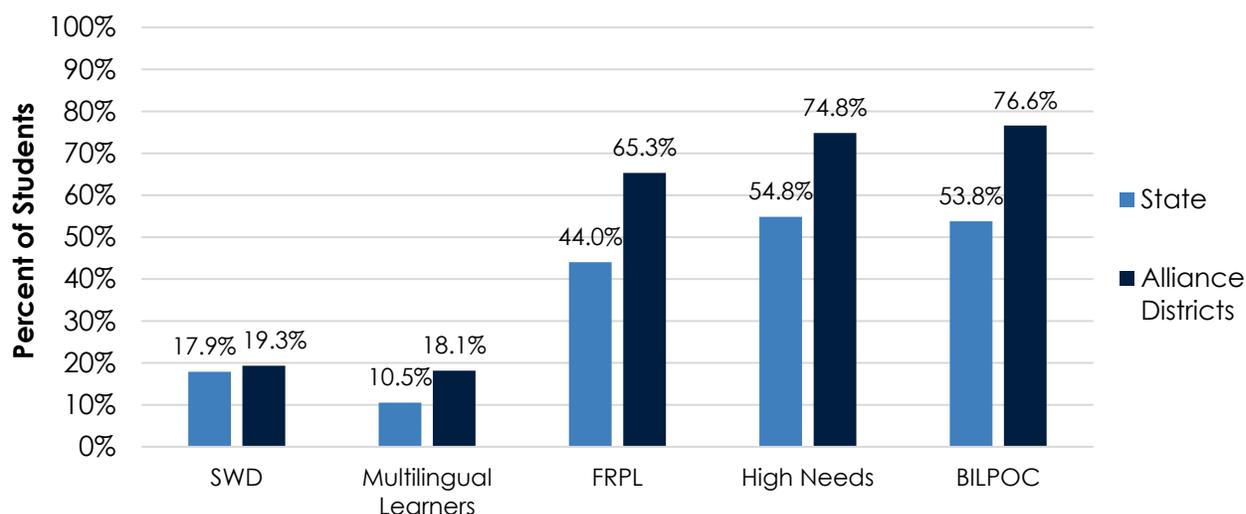
[B] The "High Needs" subgroup includes: students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
[C] The School and State Finance Project uses BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latine, People of Color) to refer to individuals who self-identify as American 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 this report comes from the CSDE.

The acronym BILPOC 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.

How are Alliance Districts Funded?

Being designated an Alliance District does not mean a district is provided additional state funds, nor do Alliance Districts receive funding from a separate grant program. Instead, Alliance Districts have a portion of their annual Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant[D] dollars withheld by the State until their annual Alliance District Plan is approved. Once their Alliance District Plan is approved, the withheld funds must be used to help execute the district's Plan. that can only be used to help the district meet the requirements outlined in the Alliance District Program and the goals of its Alliance District Plan.[18]

Some of the ways these withheld funds can be used include:

- A tiered system of interventions;
- Foundational reading programs for students in grades K-3;
- Additional learning time through extending the school day or extending the school year;
- Talent strategy to attract, retain, promote, and improve staff performance;
- Training for school leaders and staff around new teacher evaluation models;
- Coordinating with early childhood education providers;
- Coordinating with governmental and community programs for student support and wraparound services;
- Implementing and furthering statewide education standards;
- Recruiting minority teachers and administrators; and
- Enhancing bilingual education programs.

How are Alliance Districts Performing?

The Alliance District program aims to improve student achievement and enhance educational opportunities for students in Connecticut's lowest-performing school districts. However, the progress seen over the years has been inconsistent among Alliance Districts and ranges considerably among the different key indicators.

### *Next Generation Accountability Index*
Of the 30 original Alliance Districts, only four have seen an increase in their NGAI scores — ranging from increases of 1.2 to four points from 2015 to 2024 (with the context that this time period included the disruption to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic). Year after year, most Alliance Districts have consistently performed lower than the state average. From 2015 to 2019, 12 Alliance Districts had an increase in their NGAI scores, but since 2019, 97 percent of Alliance Districts experienced a decrease that reversed much of the progress achieved prior to the pandemic.[19]

[D] For more detailed information on Connecticut's ECS grant and formula, please visit https://schoolstatefinance.org/issues/ecs-formula.

Math

Most Alliance Districts saw an increase in their students' math performance from 2015 to 2019. However, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in decreased math performance for most districts. Post-pandemic, Alliance Districts continued to perform worse than the state average.

Chart 2: Math Performance Index for All and High Needs Students, 2015-2024
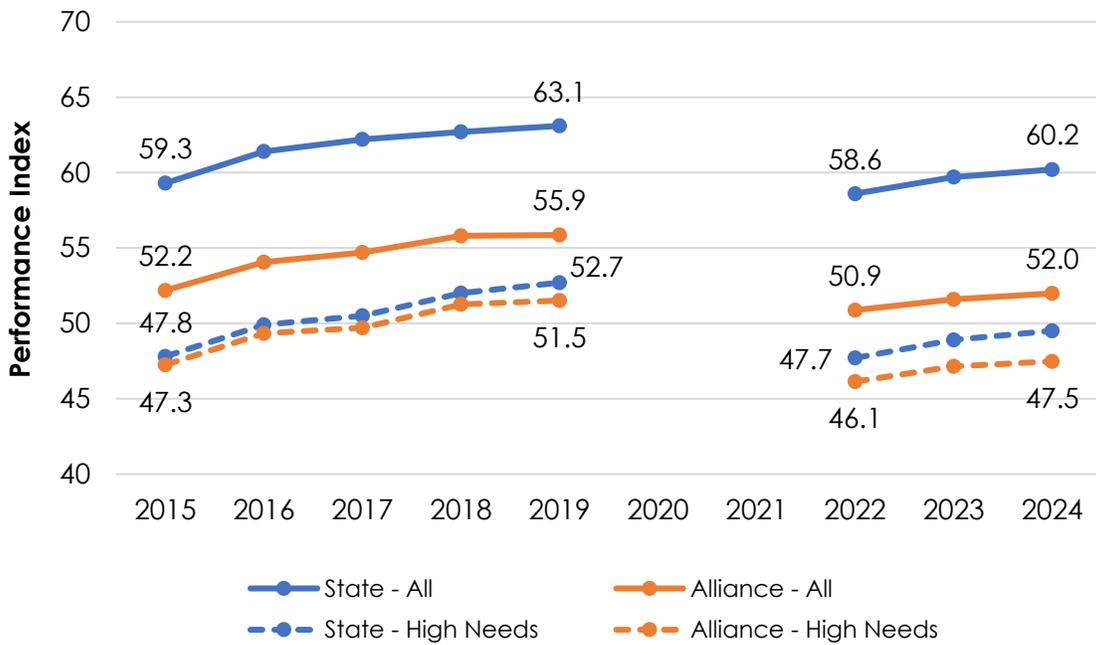
English/Language Arts

Alliance Districts have continuously performed worse than the state average in English and language arts. Additionally, all "High Need" students and "High Need" students in Alliance Districts perform about the same.[20] Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Performance Index for Alliance Districts remained relatively stable. However, since 2019, performance has decreased by about four points for all students and "High Needs" students.

Chart 3: English/Language Arts Performance Index for All and High Need Students, 2015-2024
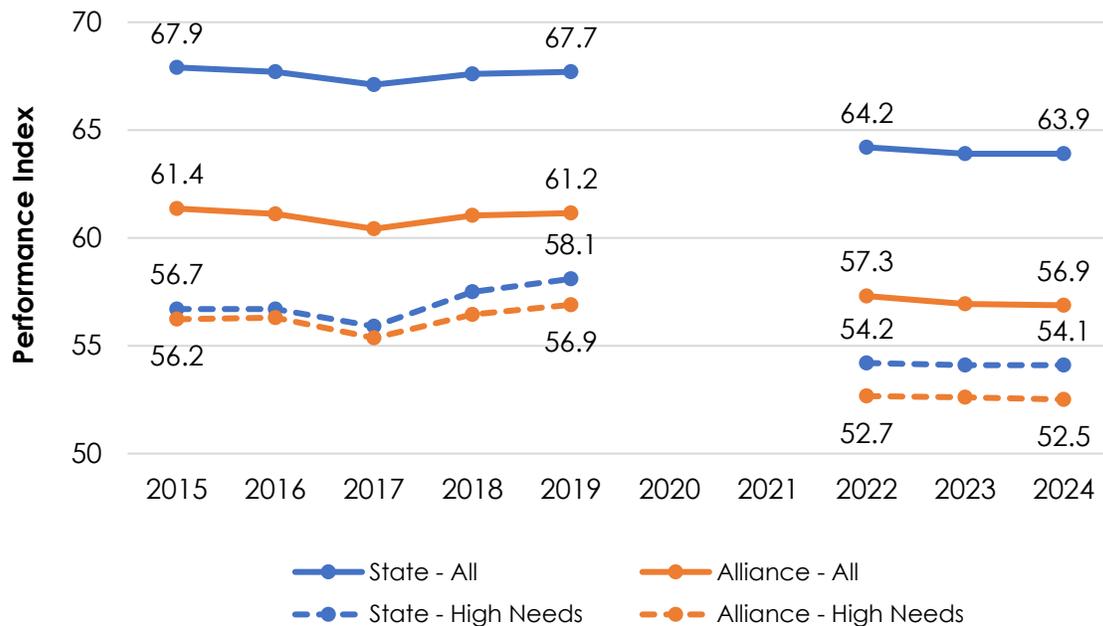
Chronic Absenteeism

From 2015 to 2024, all Alliance Districts had increases in their rates of chronic absenteeism. It is important to note that this could be due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.[21] When comparing chronic absenteeism rates from 2015 to 2019, about 60 percent of Alliance Districts had lower absenteeism rates, meaning the increases occurred from 2020 to 2024.

Four-Year Graduation Rates

Half of the original 30 Alliance Districts had lower rates of college entry in 2023 than in 2014. However, the state overall saw a one percentage point increase in the percentage of high school graduates entering a college or university within the first year of their graduation. This is primarily attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic as Connecticut saw an increase in graduation rates from 2014 to 2021 before experiencing minor decreases since 2021. Alliance Districts were also greatly affected by the pandemic, and many saw their improvements in college entry rates diminish or completely wiped away.[22]

Areas of Concern

As part of this policy briefing, the School and State Finance Project invited 10 Connecticut district superintendents to share their thoughts and areas for improvement on the Alliance District program. Out of the 10, six superintendents responded. Their shared lived experiences allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of any potential improvements for the Alliance District program.

While a majority of superintendents interviewed expressed overall satisfaction with the purpose of the Alliance District program, and the resources it can provide, all of them expressed a desire for Alliance District funds to be a guaranteed part of their ECS grant.

The superintendents also highlighted the lack of clarity provided for how withheld funds could be used, and shared there is concern about how these funds do not account for rising costs or a district's local contribution in general.

Here are some key areas of concern according to the superintendents interviewed:

1. **The Alliance District program uses an arbitrary number to designate Alliance Districts**
   Since the state doesn't use a percentage or points threshold, but instead relies on a certain number of districts, some districts have NGAI scores that would otherwise qualify them for the program.

2. **The size-based and Index-score-based eligibility requirements are exclusionary and prevent access to resources for districts that may need support**
   Currently, the Alliance District program excludes districts with lower Accountability Index scores than some districts currently in the program. Of all local and regional public schools, 51 districts have a NGAI score lower than the highest NGAI for an Alliance District (Winchester).[23] Most of these districts are ineligible due to their size.

3. **Inconsistent improvements in Alliance Districts program performance**
   A majority of Alliance Districts have made no consistent improvements since entering the program in 2013. Most Alliance Districts educate some of the state's highest-need students, underperform compared to the state average, and have made little to no gains in areas in their Index scores.

4. **There is no additional state aid provided to districts in the Alliance District program**
   Being designated an Alliance District does not provide a district with any additional state funding. Instead for a portion of each Alliance District ECS funds are withheld under the district submits its annual Alliance District Plan and the plan is approved by the commissioner of the CSDE. For districts designated as Alliance Districts prior to 2022, any ECS dollars over the districts' FY 2012 ECS grants are withheld. For the three Alliance Districts that were designated in 2022, any ECS dollars over the districts' FY 2022 ECS grants is withheld.

5. **There is a lack of uniformity in the program's implementation**
    There is no uniform implementation of the Alliance District program's requirements across designated districts. Due to the structure of withholding ECS funding, some districts, who have not experienced increases in their ECS funding, receive the resources allotted through the program but have no ECS funding withheld and aren't required to complete an Alliance District Plan.

6. **There is a lack of transparency within the program**
    Currently, there aren't any evaluations on the viability and impact of the Alliance District program (other than snapshot versions of ESSA milestones) available to the public. There is also no clarity on the role of districts in supporting schools that receive Alliance District funding and how these funds are allowed to be used.

7. **There is no off-ramp for districts to exit the Alliance District program.**
    There are currently no policies in place for districts to exit the Alliance District program. There are also no real incentives for districts to *want* to exit the program and lose their Alliance District status. Alliance Districts are currently eligible for an ECS minimum aid ratio of 10 percent, ECS hold harmless policies (which prevent these districts from receiving anything lower than the greater of their FY 2017 ECS grant amount, prior year ECS grant, or current year ECS grant), and eligibility for priority in some grant programs.

Future of the Alliance District Program

While the Alliance District program is supposed to aid school districts in increasing student achievement and enhancing educational opportunities, the program has performed inconsistently since its inception and should be evaluated to determine ways to improve its current implementation.

Through the Alliance District program and other state school improvement efforts, Connecticut has the opportunity to better utilize its more holistic measurements of a district's ability to prepare its students to be college and career ready, and create a more effective system. One example Connecticut could look to is Massachusetts' and its school improvement work.

Similar to Connecticut, Massachusetts has a system for identifying and providing support to its lowest-performing districts.[24] However, Massachusetts uses a differentiated framework to determine the level and type of support offered — allotting additional funds to its lowest-performing schools and districts.[25]

Massachusetts' Target Assistance Grant (TAG) funds selected schools and districts to support the development and implementation of Sustainable Improvement Plans (SIP). Similar to Alliance District Plans, SIPs are used by districts to outline their plans for meeting the goals aligned with Massachusetts' turnaround practice models and the state's Multi-tiered System of Support. The primary goal of the TAG is to improve student achievement by expanding a district's capacity to support and educate students, especially those

with more significant learning needs.[E] By coupling increased investments and improved program design through the NGAS, Connecticut can provide more targeted support to its lowest-performing and highest-need districts and schools.

Recommendations for Improvement

Based on superintendent feedback and our analyses of Connecticut's Alliance District program and Massachusetts' turnaround efforts, there are several opportunities for improving Connecticut's Alliance District program. These recommendations include:

1. **Implementing a tiered-system of support model for the Alliance District program[F]**
   Like the Massachusetts TAG program, Connecticut has a tiered support system to ensure districts with greater needs receive greater resources, which is currently outlined in Connecticut's ESSA Plan. To achieve the state's goals the CSDE should implement the tiered support already defined in the state's plan. Supports for districts would include, but are not limited to:

   - CSDE/district in-depth program review;
   - Mandatory training modules in targets not met, focused on evidence-based interventions to meet subgroup needs;
   - Mandatory training modules in fidelity of implementation, progress monitoring, and culturally responsive pedagogy;
   - State-directed needs assessment with stakeholder input from whole school populations on target(s) not met;
   - CSDE-directed district plan revision;
   - Quarterly "Evidence for Fidelity of Implementation" for target(s) not met;
   - CSDE site visit, monitoring, and evaluation, including central office and CSDE walkthroughs of schools; and
   - State structured decision-making pathways including:
     - Reconstitution
     - Consolidation/closure
     - Restructuring school governance council
     - Restructuring school board governance.

2. **Create an off-ramp process for districts to exit the program once they reach targets**
   Currently, there are no incentives for districts to exit the Alliance District program. However, there are incentives to stay in it. By creating incentives for districts to exit the Alliance District program the State could save money that could be reinvested in districts that require additional support.

[E] For more information the TAG program, please visit https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2023/222-325/.
[F] For more detailed information on Connecticut's tiered system of support in ESSA plan, please visit https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/essa/august_4_ct_consolidated_state_essa_plan.pdf.

3. **Increase transparency**

Understanding the intricacies of the Alliance District program's inner workings is challenging, as there is limited insight into how the program is performing. It would be beneficial for the State to provide more publicly available information about the Alliance District program. This could be accomplished through a centralized dashboard that displays NGAI scores by Index area, state averages, and milestone goals. A dashboard would allow districts to see their progress compared to the rest of the state, and provide community members with important information. It would also be beneficial to require school districts to prominently display their Alliance District Plans on their websites with a narrative report of how the proposed expenditure of funds is targeted to increase performance.

4. **Create an evaluation plan**

In Connecticut, there is a pressing need for more information on the performance of the Alliance District program in order to evaluate if the goals outlined in the Connecticut Consolidated State Plan under ESSA are being achieved. Currently, there is no publicly available evaluation report on the Alliance District program, making it difficult for district leaders and policymakers to fully understand the program's impact and make informed decisions. This could be resolved if the CSDE provided a public report on the program's effectiveness before adding additional districts. A midpoint review every three years could also help resolve this lack of evaluation.

5. **Increase investment**

Research has consistently shown that increases in education spending help students achieve better outcomes. Increased education spending improves student outcomes through a combination of reductions in class size, having more adults per student in schools, increases in instructional time, and increases in teacher salary that may attract and retain a more highly qualified teaching workforce.[26] For students from economically disadvantaged families, increasing education spending yields significant improvements in educational attainment, wages, family income, and a reduction in the incidence of adult poverty.[27] It is crucial that we continue to provide these supports, especially for students from economically disadvantaged communities, to ensure all students have equitable opportunities for success throughout school and life.

6. **Increase Oversight**

Connecticut can provide additional support to all public school districts in the state, including, but not limited to, Alliance Districts, by creating a School District Accountability Review Board that provides intensive in-district support and guidance for Connecticut's highest-need districts. This board could include former superintendents, former chief financial officers, former academic officers, and former special education directors — just to name a few.

Conclusion

The Alliance District Program is one way Connecticut has attempted to increase student achievement in its lowest-performing districts and schools across the state. Despite aiming to aid districts and schools to improve student achievement and enhancing educational opportunities, the program has performed inconsistently since its inception and should be regularly evaluated to determine shortfalls and implement changes.

Connecticut has the opportunity and obligation to improve the Alliance District program and ensure all students are academically successful and prepared for college and careers. By coupling increased investments and improved program design, Connecticut can provide more targeted support to its lowest-performing and highest-need districts and schools.

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