SCHOOL + STATE FINANCE PROJECT

Alliance District and Priority School District Grants

Policy Briefing - October 8, 2026

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 the 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

Key Takeaways

- Alliance Districts are 36 of the lowest-performing school districts with at least 1,000 students at the time of their designation.
- The Alliance District grant provides the boards of education for Alliance Districts with direct funding held back from the town's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant.
- Alliance District funding must be used to support programs and initiatives aimed at increasing student performance and outcomes.
- To receive Alliance District funding, districts must submit a detailed plan on how funds with be used in accordance with grant rules.

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 ECS grant. In fiscal year 2027, the Alliance District grant portion of the ECS grant was approximately $536 million, or 22% of all ECS funding.[1] Alliance District funding is contingent on eligible school districts complying with the Alliance District program's requirements.[2]

How the Alliance District portion of a town's ECS grant is calculated depends on when a district was designated as an Alliance District.[3] For districts designated as an Alliance District prior to FY 2023, the Alliance District portion is calculated by taking the town's current year ECS grant and subtracting the town's FY 2012 ECS grant amount.[4] This means all ECS increases to Alliance Districts since FY 2012 are considered Alliance District funding for these districts. For districts designated as Alliance Districts for the first time in FY 2023, the Alliance District portion is calculated by taking the town's current year ECS grant and subtracting the town's FY 2022 grant amount.[5]

Alliance District funds must support new initiatives, not supplant existing costs.[A] 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.[6]

Additionally, in FY 2025, the CSDE was required to withhold 10% of an Alliance District's FY 2021 grant that was above the district's FY 2020 grant. This 10% was then be sent to the Alliance District to be specifically used for the recruitment, certification, and hiring of racial or ethnic minority teaching candidates.[7]

Eligibility

Alliance Districts are local school districts identified as among 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.[8] To qualify, districts must have a minimum of 1,000 students at the time of designation.[9] The list of the Alliance Districts for the 2026-27 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.[10] Approved Alliance District Plans must be posted on the CSDE website.[11,12] 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.[13]

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:[14]

- 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;

[A] 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)."

- 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.[15]

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.[16]

Changes Made During the 2026 Legislative Session

Although lawmakers did not make major changes to the Alliance District program in the 2026 legislative session, it is worth noting how often legislation is drafted to change how the Alliance District program functions. In recent legislative sessions, numerous bills have been drafted to expand, reduce, dismantle, or revamp the Alliance District program — highlighting the growing need for changes to the program's current structure. Additionally, in February 2026, the CSDE released a report on the effectiveness of the Alliance District program, which contained recommendations to significantly change the existing Alliance District program.[17]

During the 2026 legislative session, lawmakers did modify and establish higher education programs that affect Alliance Districts.[18] Public Act 26-68 required the Office of Higher Education (OHE) to develop an initiative to support the creation of Promise Programs across the state, Beginning July 1, 2026, the OHE is tasked with coordinating with municipalities and regional coalitions, and providing new Promise Programs with technical assistance. The goal of the initiative is to prioritize programs serving students in Alliance Districts and to establish eight such programs by January 1, 2031.[19]

Public Act 26-149 amended previous legislation, renaming the Diverse Educators Program to the Aspiring Educator Program and broadening eligibility to candidates from any of the following populations: those underrepresented in Connecticut's teaching profession or those identified under state law as belonging to a teacher shortage area. The changes also expanded eligibility for funding of up to $10,000 per year to graduates in good standing of teacher preparation programs at any four-year institution of higher learning in the state, rather than only graduates from Alliance Districts.[20]

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.[21] Additionally, if a district has funds leftover from one fiscal year, the district may carry over those funds for the following fiscal year.[22]

Priority School Districts

Key Takeaways

- Priority School Districts are districts with the largest student populations and the districts serving the highest number and highest percentage of students under the Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) program.
- Priority School Districts receive grants under three programs aimed at increasing student achievement, enhancing educational opportunities, and providing additional learning time during the summer and weekends.
- Priority School Districts must submit applications outlining planned uses of funds and submit annual expenditure reports to the CSDE.

Introduction

The Priority School District program is designed to assist eligible districts in improving student outcomes and providing additional learning opportunities. Funding is intended to increase access to early reading intervention programs, extended-hours programs, and summer school programs.[23]

Funding

In FYs 2026 and 2027, Priority School Districts will receive $37,150,868 in total, including $30,818,778 under the Priority School District grant, $2,919,883 for extended school building hours, and $3,412,207 for summer school and weekend school programs.[24]

Eligibility

Priority School Districts are districts identified using the following criteria:[25]

1. The eight towns with the largest populations;
2. The 11 towns with the highest number of children under the TFA program plus the mastery count[B] 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 Priority School Districts for the 2026-27 school year can be found in the Appendix of this policy briefing.

[B] 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.

Proposal Process

School districts designated as Priority School Districts can qualify for specific grants in order to improve student achievement and enhance educational opportunities.[26] Eligible school districts are required to submit grant proposals annually to the CSDE for consideration of funding.[27] 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.[28]

Proposal Requirements

Proposals for Priority School District grants should include plans to improve student achievement and educational opportunities. At least 20% of each grant must be used for early reading intervention programs,[29] and the remainder of the funds may be expended on any of the following:[30]

- 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;
- 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 2027, Priority School District Extended School Hour Programs were allocated $2,919,883.[31] These programs include academic, enrichment, and recreational activities and programming that takes place before or after school, on weekends, and/or during summers and other vacations.[32] These programs are generally operated by community nonprofit organizations in cooperation with the school district.[33] These programs must take place in a public school building to qualify for the grant.[34]

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:[35]

- Total hours of operation;
- Number of students 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 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:[36]

- 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% 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:[37]

- 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 opportunities 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.[38]

Additionally, schools may charge a fee of up to 75% 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.[39]

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 2027, Priority School Districts were allocated $3,412,207 for summer school and weekend school programs.[40] 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.[41] Currently, the CSDE has prioritized summer school grants for programs for students in grades K-3 who are substantially deficient in reading.[42] 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:[43]

- 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.[44]

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.[45]

Changes Made During the 2026 Legislative Session

Lawmakers did not substantially alter Priority School District grants during the 2026 legislative session. However, in February 2026, the CSDE released a report on the effectiveness of the Alliance District program that contained a recommendation for the state to consolidate the Priority School District and the Alliance District programs into a single program.[46]

Appendix

The tables below list designated Alliance Districts and Priority School Districts for the 2026-27 school year. The CSDE designates Alliance Districts every five years and identifies Priority School Districts annually.

2026-27 Alliance Districts[47]	
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

2026-27 Priority School Districts[48]	
Ansonia	New Haven
Bridgeport	New London
Danbury	Norwalk
Derby	Norwich
East Hartford	Stamford
Hartford	Waterbury
Manchester	Windham
Meriden	
New Britain	

Endnotes

[1] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.) ECS Entitlements broken down by Alliance and Non-Alliance portions. https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Fiscal-Services/Education-Cost-Sharing-Grant-ECS-MBR/Documents
[2] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Conn. Acts 23-208 § 5
[8] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Alliance Districts: Overview. https://portal.ct.gov/sde/alliance-districts/alliance-and-opportunity-districts
[9] Ibid.
[10] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u
[11] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Alliance District Approved Plans. https://portal.ct.gov/sde/lists/alliance-district-approved-plans
[12] Conn. Acts 23-167 § 5
[13] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u
[14] Ibid.
[15] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 170, § 10-223*l*
[16] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u
[17] Connecticut State Department of Education. (2026). *Report on the Effectiveness of the Alliance District Program*. Hartford, CT: Author. https://www.cga.ct.gov/ed/related/20260924_%20Alliance%20District%20Report%20Forum/Report%20on%20the%20Effectiveness%20of%20the%20Alliance%20District%20Program.pdf
[18] Conn. Acts 26-68 § 382
[19] Ibid.
[20] Conn. Acts 26-149
[21] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262u
[22] Ibid.
[23] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Priority School District Grants: Overview. https://portal.ct.gov/sde/turnaround/priority-school-district-grants
[24] Conn. Acts 25-168 § 23
[25] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266p
[26] Ibid.
[27] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266q
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266p
[31] Conn. Acts 26-68.
[32] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266t
[33] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Priority School District Grants: Overview. https://portal.ct.gov/sde/turnaround/priority-school-district-grants
[34] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266t
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Conn. Acts 23-204 § 24
[41] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265m
[42] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Priority School District Grants: Overview. https://portal.ct.gov/sde/turnaround/priority-school-district-grants
[43] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265m
[44] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265g
[45] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-265m

[46] Connecticut State Department of Education. (2026). *Report on the Effectiveness of the Alliance District Program*. Hartford, CT: Author. https://www.cga.ct.gov/ed/related/20260924_%20Alliance%20District%20Report%20Forum/Report%20on%20the%20Effectiveness%20of%20the%20Alliance%20District%20Program.pdf
[47] Connecticut State Department of Education. (2024). Education Cost Sharing Shell for FY 2025.
[48] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). 2025-2026 Designated Priority School Districts. https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/alliance-districts/list_of_priority_school_districts.pdf