

## **Introduction**

In Connecticut, there are various types of public schools of choice, 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. This policy briefing includes information about the objective, history, administration, and funding of designated high schools and endowed academies.

## **Designated High Schools<sup>B</sup>**

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,<sup>1</sup> the price of which is usually negotiated between the sending and receiving districts.<sup>2</sup> School districts sending students to designated high schools must provide transportation to the school(s) it designates local students to attend.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

Most school districts that choose not to maintain a high school designate between one and four high schools that students may attend,<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> In another example, the City of Norwich features 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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>A</sup> Originally published in May 2019 and updated in December 2021, this policy briefing has been updated again to reflect statutory changes as well as new data and information.

<sup>B</sup> The Gilbert School's enrollment and budgetary information is pending, and relevant sections will be updated once updated figures are received.

In 2015, the Connecticut General Assembly's Program Review and Investigations Committee (PRI)<sup>c</sup> 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 (NFA), 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

## 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.<sup>11</sup> Ecclesiastical schools are not eligible to become endowed academies.<sup>12</sup> Endowed academies in Connecticut are classified as local education agencies by the CSDE for the purposes of reporting to the federal

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<sup>c</sup> The PRI was eliminated by the General Assembly in 2017 under Public Act 17-60.

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

### **History**

Connecticut has three endowed academies: The Gilbert School in Winchester, The Woodstock Academy in Woodstock, and NFA in Norwich.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

Endowed academies predate the widespread availability of public high schools, which in Connecticut proliferated in the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> For example, The Woodstock Academy was founded in 1801 and became the public school of record for the town of Woodstock in 1913,<sup>18</sup> while The Gilbert School has served the students of the town of Winchester since its founding in 1895.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

### **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.<sup>22</sup> 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 fiscal year 2022, the ECS formula contained \$1.44 million in total for all towns sending students to designated high schools.

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 \$17,702 per student.<sup>23</sup> 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 \$20,900 per student and tuition for private-pay boarding students is \$60,000 per year.<sup>24,25</sup>

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 3.7 percent in FY 2026.<sup>26</sup> Tuition at NFA for the 2024-25 school year ranges from \$14,332 per student for its general education program to \$74,512 per student for certain special education programs.<sup>27,28</sup>

The cost to attend The Gilbert School per student is not publicly available. Currently, there are no statutory restrictions on the amount of tuition endowed academies can charge school districts.<sup>29</sup> According to the definition of “regular program expenditures” outlined in the statute related to the ECS formula, the towns of Winchester and Woodstock are permitted to include in their public schools’ current expenses the amounts spent by The Gilbert School and The Woodstock Academy, respectively, from each school’s endowment.<sup>30</sup>

The three endowed academies are also eligible for school construction grants if they provide school facilities to towns that designate them as their high school for at least 10 years after the last grant payment.<sup>31</sup> Host towns may issue municipal bonds in support of school building projects for endowed academies.<sup>32</sup> Endowed academies are also eligible for state telecommunications grants.<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, beginning in FY 2022, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CSDE was 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.<sup>34</sup>

### **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 12-member board of trustees, made up primarily of school alumni.<sup>35</sup> NFA also maintains the NFA Foundation, Inc., which manages the endowment of the academy.<sup>36</sup> In 2023, the NFA endowment was approximately \$79.7 million.<sup>37</sup>

The board of The W.L. Gilbert School Corporation is comprised of nine members who manage the day-to-day oversight of The Gilbert School.<sup>38</sup> The W.L. Gilbert School Corporation ended the 2023 fiscal year with approximately \$8.2 million in net assets.<sup>39</sup> The W.L. Gilbert Trust Corporation was founded by William L. Gilbert in 1895 and manages the endowment of The Gilbert School. In 2023, the W.L. Gilbert Trust Corporation listed an approximately \$19.8 million endowment.<sup>40</sup>

The Woodstock Academy Corporation 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.<sup>41</sup> The Woodstock Academy Foundation, incorporated in 2010, accepts donations on behalf of The Woodstock Academy,<sup>42</sup> and in FY 2023, the Foundation had approximately \$35.94 million in assets.<sup>43</sup> The Woodstock Academy ended FY 2023 with approximately \$12.3 million in net assets, and an approximately \$46.6 million endowment.<sup>44</sup>

### ***International Students***

Many private schools accept international students, providing enriching cultural experiences while increasing diversity. Connecticut's endowed academies have tapped into this pool of private pay students, as full-time boarding and day students. The Gilbert School offers an International Residency Program, in which students' families pay private tuition to attend the school.<sup>45</sup> During the 2024-25 school year, The Woodstock Academy student population was approximately 10 percent international students.<sup>46</sup> While NFA enrolled 32 international students (approximately two percent) who paid an average of \$16,786 in yearly tuition.<sup>47</sup>

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

**Enrollment for Connecticut's Endowed Academies, 2024-25 School Year**

School	Connecticut Students	% Connecticut Students	Private Pay Students	% Private Pay Students	Total Enrollment
<b>The Gilbert School<sup>48</sup></b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	452
<b>Norwich Free Academy<sup>49</sup></b>	1,999	97%	54	3%	2,053
<b>The Woodstock Academy<sup>50</sup></b>	833	80%	209	20%	1,042

### **Student Demographics**

43 percent of the 3,492 students educated at Connecticut's endowed academies during the 2023-24 school year were identified as BIPOC.<sup>D</sup> Additionally, 11.4 percent of Connecticut's endowed academy students required special education services; 8.3 percent were provided multilingual learner services; and 41.9 percent were classified as economically disadvantaged due to their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>51</sup>

### **Recent Legislative Changes**

Two legislative changes were enacted during the Connecticut General Assembly's 2024 legislative session that impacted endowed academies. These changes specifically concerned graduation requirements, indoor air quality, and school construction.

**Public Act 24-45:** An Act Concerning Education Mandate Relief, School Discipline, and Disconnected Youth

- Exempted students with F-1 visas from completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), institutional financial aid, or signed waiver in order to graduate from high school.<sup>52</sup>

**Public Act 24-151:** An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State and Concerning Provisions Related to State and Municipal Tax Administration, General Government, and School Building Projects

- Allowed endowed academies to receive Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) grants and required endowed academies to receive the same reimbursement rate for IAQ grants as they do for school building project grants.<sup>53</sup>
- Eliminated the requirements that permitted endowed academies to be eligible for school construction grants only if at least half of their governing board, with the exclusion of the board's chairperson, represented the school boards of the town that designated the endowed academy as their high school.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>D</sup> 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](mailto:info@schoolstatefinance.org).



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-33.

<sup>2</sup> Connecticut General Assembly, Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee. (2015). *Regional Cooperation Between Local Boards of Education: Staff Findings and Recommendations Report*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/docs/2015/Regional%20Cooperation%20Staff%20F&R%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-35.

<sup>5</sup> Connecticut General Assembly, Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee. (2015). *Regional Cooperation Between Local Boards of Education: Staff Findings and Recommendations Report*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/docs/2015/Regional%20Cooperation%20Staff%20F&R%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Town of Preston, Board of Education. (2023). *Policies, Regulations, and Bylaws* (5117.1). Preston, CT: Author. Available from <http://z2policy.cabe.org/cabe/browse/preston/preston/z20000193>.

<sup>8</sup> City of Norwich, Norwich Public Schools. (2017). *Board Policy 5116: Designation of High Schools/Transportation/Graduation Requirements*. Norwich, CT: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.norwichpublicschools.org/uploaded/documents/\\_dis/policies/5116\\_designation-of-high-schools-transportation.pdf](https://www.norwichpublicschools.org/uploaded/documents/_dis/policies/5116_designation-of-high-schools-transportation.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Connecticut General Assembly, Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee. (2015). *Regional Cooperation Between Local Boards of Education: Staff Findings and Recommendations Report*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/docs/2015/Regional%20Cooperation%20Staff%20F&R%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> McCaw, M. (2021). *Letter to Representative Joe Courtney RE: the State of Connecticut plan for Emergency Assistance to Non-public Schools (EANS)*. Retrieved from <https://courtney.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/courtney-evo.house.gov/files/Sec.%20McCaw%2C%20Representative%20Courtney%20EANS%20and%20Endowed%20Academies%20Funding.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Moran, J. (2016). *Woodstock Academy and Other Private Academies that Serve as Public Schools* (2016-R-0121). Hartford, CT: Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2016/rpt/pdf/2016-R-0121.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sullivan, M. (2016). *Models of Public High School Education in Connecticut* (2016-R-0155). Hartford, CT: Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2016/rpt/pdf/2016-R-0155.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Rose, C. (2012). *Milestones in Connecticut Education: 1912-2012* (2012-R-0094). Hartford, CT: Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2012/rpt/2012-R-0094.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> The Woodstock Academy. (n.d.). *History of The Woodstock Academy*. Retrieved from <https://www.woodstockacademy.org/about/history>.

<sup>19</sup> The Gilbert School. (n.d.). *History of The Gilbert School*. Retrieved from <https://www.gilbertschool.org/about-us/history>.

<sup>20</sup> Steiner, B.C. (1893). *The History of Education in Connecticut* (No. 14). H.B. Adams (Ed.). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hn2j6x;view=1up;seq=1;size=150>.

<sup>21</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-34.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Susi, M. (2025, February 7). Personal communication with Associate Head of School for Finance & Operations, The Woodstock Academy.

<sup>24</sup> The Woodstock Academy. (n.d.). *Tuition & Financial Aid*. Retrieved from <https://www.woodstockacademy.org/admissions/tuition-financialaid>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>26</sup> Bessette, C. (2025, January 13). Norwich Free Academy budget has 3.7% tuition increase. *The Day*. Retrieved from <https://theday.com/news/692206/norwich-free-academy-budget-has-37-tuition-increase/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Quesnel, N. (2025, February 4). Personal communication with Head of School, Norwich Free Academy.
- <sup>28</sup> Norwich budget
- <sup>29</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 164, § 10-34.
- <sup>30</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262f.
- <sup>31</sup> Sullivan, M. (2023). *School Construction Grant (2023-R-0250)*. Hartford, CT: Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research. Retrieved from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2023/rpt/pdf/2023-R-0250.pdf>.
- <sup>32</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 173, § 10-289.
- <sup>33</sup> Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 163, § 10-4h.
- <sup>34</sup> Conn. Acts 21-2 (June Special Session).
- <sup>35</sup> Norwich Free Academy. (n.d.). Governance. Retrieved from <https://www.nfaschool.org/about-us/governance>.
- <sup>36</sup> NFA Foundation. (n.d.). Endowment. Retrieved from <https://www.nfafoundation.org/how-to-give/endowed-gifts>.
- <sup>37</sup> NFA Foundation, Inc. (2023). *IRS Form 990 Tax Year 2023*. Retrieved from <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/60762783/202401349349300925/full>.
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- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> The Woodstock Academy. (2018). *Manual of Governance*. Woodstock, CT: Author. Retrieved from [https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1717081430/woodstockacademyorg/u7t2hvg28sestmorq2xe/the\\_woodstock\\_academy\\_manual\\_of\\_governance\\_15\\_web.pdf](https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1717081430/woodstockacademyorg/u7t2hvg28sestmorq2xe/the_woodstock_academy_manual_of_governance_15_web.pdf).
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- <sup>43</sup> Woodstock Academy Foundation. (n.d.). *IRS Form 990 Tax Year 2023*. Retrieved from <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/273176759>.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> The Gilbert School. (n.d.). Apply to the International Program. Retrieved from <https://www.gilbertschool.org/admissions/apply-to-the-international-program>.
- <sup>46</sup> Susi, M. (2025, February 7). Personal communication with Associate Head of School for Finance & Operations, The Woodstock Academy.
- <sup>47</sup> Quesnel, N. (2025, February 4). Personal communication with Head of School, Norwich Free Academy.
- <sup>48</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (2024). EdSight - Enrollment Dashboard. Retrieved from [https://public-edsight.ct.gov/students/enrollment-dashboard?language=en\\_US](https://public-edsight.ct.gov/students/enrollment-dashboard?language=en_US).
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- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.