SCHOOL + STATE FINANCE PROJECT

Students with Disabilities Weight for the ECS Formula

October 23, 2026

The Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant is Connecticut's primary form of state funding for K-12 education. The grant provides approximately $2.46 billion annually to local and regional public schools and is based on the ECS formula, which has several different components. One of these components is need-based weights.

Current ECS Formula Weights

Weights are used in education funding formulas to drive more funds to students who research has found typically require additional resources and educational supports to achieve at the same levels as their non-need peers. The ECS formula contains three need-based weights that provide greater funding to districts for students with specific learning needs. Below is a description of each of the weights currently in the ECS formula.

- **Low-Income Students:** increases formula's foundation amount by 30% for students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
- **Multilingual Learners:** increases formula's foundation amount by 25% for students who are identified as needing additional English-language skills.
- **Concentrated Poverty:** increases formula's foundation amount an additional 15% for low-income students residing in districts where 60% or more of the enrollment is considered low-income. This weight applies only to a district's low-income students above the 60% level.

Absence of Weight for Students with Disabilities

However, one learning need that is absent from the ECS formula is special education. Adding a single or tiered special education weight to the ECS formula for students with disabilities (SWD) would provide a means for the State to support students who receive special education services and the costs associated with their education.

While all districts would benefit from the inclusion of a SWD weight or weights, this change would particularly support under-resourced municipalities that have less means to adequately fund special education services through local property tax revenue alone. This is especially true for Connecticut's largest cities, which have the highest number of students with disabilities, as well as smaller, rural districts that have the highest percentages of students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Students with Disabilities Formula Weights in the U.S.

Thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia currently use a need-based formula weight in some capacity to provide funding to their school districts for special education services. Some states provide funds using a single weight while others use multiple weights or a hybrid approach. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of different types of formula weights states use for students with disabilities, as well as a brief description for each type.

Table 1: Formula Weights (by Category) for Students with Disabilities[1]

Weight Type	Description	States Using Weight Type
Single Weight	A single weight or dollar amount used to provide aid for students based on certain factors or student needs.	Alaska, California, Connecticut, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Vermont
Multiple Weights	States that utilize more than one weight or dollar amount to provide aid for students based on certain factors or student needs.	Alabama, Arizona, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington
Hybrid Weights	States use a flat weight or multiple weights in concert with another mechanism.	Colorado, Hawaii, Minnesota

[1] Education Commission of the States. (2026, June). 50-State Comparison: Special Education Funding. https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/k-12-funding-2024-04

Special Education and Expansion Development (SEED) Grant

In 2025, the Connecticut General Assembly created the Special Education and Expansion Development (SEED) grant to provide dedicated funding to school districts for students with disabilities. SEED grants are calculated using the structure of the ECS formula with a single SWD weight of 50%.[2] However, the SEED grant exists outside of the ECS formula. The SEED grant program was created outside of the ECS formula to ensure all local and regional school districts would receive increased funding for students with disabilities, regardless of if a town was considered "overfunded" by the ECS formula.[3]

Although the creation of the SEED grant provided dedicated state funding for students with disabilities, the SEED grant does not fully address funding requirements related to special education. For fiscal year 2027, the uncapped (fully funded) entitlement for the SEED grant was an estimated $186 million, but the grant was only partially funded at $30 million.[4] As a result, SEED grants for each town were reduced proportionally to fit within available appropriations — resulting in towns receiving roughly 16% of their full calculated entitlement.[5] Additionally, the use of a single weight for special education does not consider the wide range of costs associated with educating students with disabilities.

Furthermore, SEED grants come with significant reporting requirements and fund restrictions. Any school board receiving a SEED grant in the amount of $10,000 or more must submit an expenditure report to the Connecticut State Department of Education.[6] The SEED grant can only be used toward salaries and benefits, interdistrict collaboration, and new curriculum supplies, but it cannot offset existing funds. Additionally, SEED grant funds cannot be used for administrative functions, operating expenses, professional development/training, parent activities, third-party contractors/vendors, general education, staff/supplies/equipment, or Tier 1 intervention staff/supplies/equipment.[7]

Implementing a Tiered Special Education Weight

While the creation of the SEED grant program provided dedicated state funding for students with disabilities, changes to the SWD weight would help ensure the State is better supporting students with disabilities. Introducing a tiered weighting system would better account for the complexities of special education and more equitably fund students based on their needs.

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[2] For more information on how SEED grants are calculated, please visit: https://schoolstatefinance.org/hubfs/Reports/SEED%20Grant%20Infographic.pdf

[3] Since FY 2022, the General Assembly has instituted a hold-harmless provision for towns considered "overfunded" by the ECS formula. Due to the impacts of this hold-harmless provision, some towns would not have seen their ECS grant amounts change, even with the addition of a 50% SWD weight. By providing weighted student support separate from the formula, the General Assembly was able to ensure all districts received greater support for students with disabilities.

[4] Uncapped entitlements are determined by the total amount of special education students, the ECS Base Aid Ratio, and the ECS formula's foundation amount. Capped entitlements are calculated using a grant proportion, which is determined by an uncapped entitlement amount ratio, and a $30 million appropriation.

[5] School and State Finance Project. (2026). *Special Education and Expansion Development (SEED) Grant*. Southington, CT: Author. https://schoolstatefinance.org/hubfs/Reports/SEED%20Grant%20Infographic.pdf

[6] Connecticut State Department of Education. (2026, August 27). Bureau of Special Education Update, August 2026: Fiscal Matters. https://portal.ct.gov/sde/the-bureau-bulletin/2026/bse-newsletter-august-2026

[7] Ibid.

A tiered funding weight is a mechanism used to allocate funding based on student specific needs. Unlike a single (non-tiered) weight, a tiered system weights SWD counts differently, depending on the level of supports required by students. This results in increased support for students with higher needs and therefore, higher associated costs. While almost half of states utilize a tiered weighting system, every state's tiered weight system is unique.

For example, Tennessee's tiered SWD weight provides an option Connecticut could consider adapting to fit either within the ECS formula, or as a modification to the SEED grant. The Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) formula uses a flat per-student base amount alongside cost multipliers tailored to unique learning needs of students with disabilities.[8] Under TISA's 10 Unique Learning Needs (ULN) tiers, the formula generates additional weights ranging from 15% to 150%. These allocations provide funding to align with IEP specifications as outlined in Tennessee statute.[9]

Cost of Implementing a Tiered Weight

Adopting a tiered SWD weight framework for Connecticut would distribute state aid more equitably based on the needs of students with disabilities in each district. This method ensures the State's support meets the unique needs of districts and their students. However, due to data limitations, calculating the cost of a tiered weighting model is currently not possible. The CSDE does not publicly report disaggregated special education data, specifically unsuppressed district-level counts of disability categories and instructional time. Without this data, the School and State Finance Project cannot accurately model how this weight could shift state aid across school districts or impact education budgets. Additionally, the cost and impact to districts would vary depending on if a tiered weight was added to the ECS formula or to a fully-funded SEED grant.

[8] Tennessee Department of Education. (2026). *2026-27 TISA Guide*. Nashville, TN: Author. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/tisa-resources/2026-27_TISA_Guide.pdf
[9] Ibid.