SCHOOL + STATE FINANCE PROJECT

Fact Sheet: Open Choice Program

October 8, 2026

Open Choice is a program in which Connecticut students can attend schools in local public school districts outside the community in which they reside. Specifically, the Open Choice program allows students in more urban districts to attend public schools in nearby suburban districts, and it provides an opportunity for students in suburban and rural communities to attend public schools in a nearby urban center.

This fact sheet covers the basics of the Open Choice program, including its objectives, how it operates, who can participate, and how it is funded.

Purpose of the Open Choice Program[1]

- Primary purpose of the Open Choice program is to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation for students in Connecticut's local public schools.
- Program is also intended to help improve academic achievement and provide a choice of educational programs for students and their families.
- Creation of the Open Choice program was part of the legislature's response to the 1996 Connecticut Supreme Court ruling in *Sheff v. O'Neill*.

Student Participation

- During the 2025-26 school year, approximately 2,800 students participated in the Open Choice program.[2] The most recent participation figures, reported by each Regional Educational Service Center (RESC), are shown in the table below.

Open Choice Student Participation by RESC Operator

RESC Operator	School Year	# of Students
ACES	2025-26	338[3]
C.E.S.	2025-26	348[4]
CREC	2024-25	2,402[5]

- Once admitted into the Open Choice program, students must be allowed to continue their education in the receiving district until they graduate high school.
- Students participating in the Open Choice program are considered residents of the towns in which they attend school for the purposes of statewide mastery testing.[6]
- If student demand for participation in the Open Choice program exceeds available seats, RESCs operate regional lotteries to determine participation.[7]

District Participation

- Districts in the Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven,[A] and New London areas are currently eligible to send and receive students from participating districts in their respective region.[8] However, New London does not currently operate an Open Choice program.
- In total, 50 school districts enrolled students through the Open Choice program, and 72 districts participated as sending and/or receiving districts, during the 2025-26 school year.[9]
- Receiving districts determine whether they will participate in the Open Choice program and how many seats they will make available to students.
- Connecticut's statutes do not specify who in a district is responsible for deciding whether or not to receive students through the Open Choice program, nor do state statutes explicitly require approval from a receiving district's local or regional board of education.
- Each RESC determines the feasibility of participation for a given district in its region, and considers available transportation options, funding, and student seats when determining district participation.[10]

Funding for Open Choice Program

- Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) distributes grants on a tiered, per-student basis to the local or regional boards of education that receive students through the Open Choice program.[11]
- Per-student grant amounts range from $3,000 to $8,000 and are determined based on the percentage of Open Choice students in the receiving district's total enrollment.[12]
    - These grant amounts increase as the percentage of Open Choice students in the receiving district increases.
    - Suburban districts within the *Sheff* region receive an additional $2,000 per student to encourage greater Open Choice participation.[13]
- For the purpose of calculating the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant, the sending and receiving school districts split the ECS allocation for each student participating in the Open Choice program.[14]
    - This is done by decreasing the aggregate resident student count by one half of a student for the sending district, and increasing the aggregate resident student count by one half of a student for the receiving district, for each Open Choice student.
- The State provides additional grants on a per-student basis for the purposes of funding transportation costs for the Open Choice program.
    - Open Choice transportation grants are provided to RESCs or local or regional boards of education to cover the "reasonable cost" of transportation for students participating in the program, within available appropriations. The statewide average of transportation grants must not exceed $3,250 per student.[15]

[A] Statutory changes added Guilford and Madison to the Open Choice program as receiving and sending districts with New Haven, although they are not member districts in the ACES RESC region. Public Act 22-80 § 27 added Guilford to the Open Choice program effective for the 2022-23 school year, and Public Act 26-1 § 37 added Madison to the Open Choice program effective for the 2026-27 school year.

    - If excess funds are available, the commissioner of the CSDE may grant additional funds beyond the $3,250 per-student limit to districts that have transportation costs exceeding that amount.[16]
- Sending districts are responsible for additional costs associated with special education services for students participating in the Open Choice program.[17]
    - Specifically, the sending district is responsible for the difference between the reasonable cost of special education and the Open Choice grant amount.
    - The receiving district is responsible for convening the planning and placement team (PPT) and meeting all the requirements of the students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).[18]

Pilot Program for Danbury and Norwalk

- Beginning in the 2022-23 school year, the Open Choice program was expanded for up to 50 students from Danbury and 50 students from Norwalk.[19]
- Districts that receive students from Danbury or Norwalk under the pilot program must allow the students to continue their education in the receiving district until they graduate high school.[20]
- The pilot program was expanded in 2024 to include 50 slots in Norwalk Public Schools for students who reside in Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, Weston, and Westport beginning in the 2024-25 school year.[21] However, no out-of-district students enrolled in Norwalk for the 2024-25 school year.[22]
- For fiscal year 2023, the CSDE provided a $4,000 per-student grant to each district receiving Danbury or Norwalk students.[23] In FY 2024 and beyond, the CSDE provides receiving districts with per-student grants based on the Open Choice program's enrollment-based grant structure.[24] In FYs 2024 and 2025, this resulted in receiving districts getting grants amounting to $3,000 per student.
- In December 2024, the CSDE submitted a report on the Danbury and Norwalk pilot program to the General Assembly. The report outlined the program's growth since 2022-23 and did not recommend any reductions in state support for the expansion of Open Choice to these districts.[25]

Sources

[1] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266aa
[2] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). EdSight: Resident Town Dashboard. https://public-edsight.ct.gov/overview/resident-town-dashboard
[3] Area Cooperative Educational Services. (n.d.). *ACES Open Choice 2026-2027* [PowerPoint slides]. New Haven, CT: Author. https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aces.org%2Fuploads%2Ffiles%2Faces-open-choice-website-26-27-5.pptx%3Fv%3D1772474194130&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK
[4] Cooperative Educational Services. (2025). *Cooperative Educational Services Annual Report 2024-2025.* Trumbull, CT: Author. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1757080425/ces/xxkamgfwz5tm96zes6t5/CESCabeSubmissionAnnualReport.pdf
[5] Capitol Region Education Council. (2025). *2024-2025 Annual Report*. Hartford, CT: Author. https://www.crec.org/about/docs/annual/AR_2025.pdf
[6] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266aa
[7] Ibid.
[8] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Open Choice Programs: Apply. https://portal.ct.gov/sde/school-choice/ct-school-choice/open-choice-programs/apply
[9] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). EdSight: Resident Town Dashboard. https://public-edsight.ct.gov/overview/resident-town-dashboard
[10] Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266aa
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Open Choice Programs: FAQs. https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/School-Choice/CT-School-Choice/Open-Choice-Programs/FAQ
[19] Conn. Acts 23-204 § 345
[20] Ibid.
[21] Conn. Acts 24-74 § 2
[22] Connecticut State Department of Education. (2024). *Danbury and Norwalk Open Choice Pilot Program.* Hartford, CT: Author.
[23] Conn. Acts 23-204 § 345
[24] Connecticut State Department of Education. (2024). *Danbury and Norwalk Open Choice Pilot Program.* Hartford, CT: Author.
[25] Ibid.