

During the Connecticut General Assembly's 2023 regular legislative session, a number of changes were passed into law that modify or create new policies related to accountability and transparency in K-12 education. For the majority of these changes, the goal is to better support students, provide families more access to information and data, and position school districts to offer the highest-quality public education as possible.

Before discussing what policy changes were passed during the 2023 legislative session, it is important to define the differences between accountability and transparency, which are often used synonymously. For the context of this policy briefing, transparency is when government agencies make public information accessible and available to the general public.¹ Accountability, on the other hand, establishes rules and procedures for policies or programs being implemented, which then can be utilized for evaluating systems to ensure their success or need for improvement.² For example, in the context of education, accountability can be the process of evaluating school or district performance based on student outcomes and achievement levels.³

This policy brief highlights policies currently in place to provide accountability and transparency in education, and the impact newly passed legislation will have on these existing policies.

Key Points

- The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is tasked with publishing school spending data publicly to allow for comparisons between districts by February 15, 2025.⁴
- The CSDE, in partnership with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), is tasked with providing, developing, and implementing an annual training program for new board of education members as of July 1, 2023.⁵
- School districts are required to provide translated documents and interpreters for Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings and for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).⁶
- The CSDE must develop a report on the effectiveness of the Alliance District program.⁷
- Charter schools are prohibited from asking or considering a student's need for special education or other related services when they apply to enroll in the charter school.⁸
- Charter schools are now explicitly required to uphold the educational interests of the state just as local and regional boards of education are required to.⁹

Brief History of Accountability and Transparency in Education

In 1965, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law. The ESEA was created to be the foundation of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." Through the law's passage, education was highlighted as a way to combat poverty by creating high standards and accountability.¹⁰ Under the Title I of the ESEA,

financial aid was provided to local education agencies (LEAs) to help educate economically disadvantaged students.¹¹ Over the next five decades, various iterations of ESEA would be passed, from No Child Left Behind in 2001 to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. Each reauthorization continued with the original policy's premise — combatting poverty through education with high standards and accountability.^A

Under ESSA, new requirements were established for statewide accountability systems. States were given more autonomy in creating their own accountability standards that measured student success more holistically.¹² In response to the new level of autonomy in designing accountability systems, Connecticut established the Next Generation Accountability System (NGAS), which uses 12 indicators to measure how well the state's education system is preparing students to be successful in and out of the classroom.^{13,B}

Next Generation Accountability System¹⁴

The NGAS uses 12 indicators to quantify how well a district prepares its students to succeed inside and outside the classroom. These indicators focus primarily on academic achievement and growth, preparation for postsecondary and career readiness and graduation rates, and include chronic absenteeism, physical fitness, and arts access for a more holistic perspective of district performance. The NGAS is also used to identify Alliance Districts for the Alliance District program. The current Alliance District program utilizes a summary performance indicator from the NGAS to identify eligible districts.

Impact of 2023 Policy Changes on Accountability and Transparency

From ensuring the rights of multilingual learners to education finance reform, the Connecticut General Assembly's 2023 regular legislative session saw a number of policies drafted, passed, or signed into law that aimed to enhance public K-12 education in the state. The sections below focus on policies adopted during the 2023 regular legislative session that impact K-12 education statewide, as well as policies that impact school choice education programs.^C Each section contains an overview of the policy change and how the policy change impacts accountability or transparency in Connecticut education.

^A For more information on the history of accountability in education, please see: School and State Finance Project. (2021). *School Accountability in Connecticut*. Hamden, CT: Author. Retrieved from <https://schoolstatefinance.org/resource-assets/School-Accountability-in-Connecticut.pdf>.

^B For the full version of Connecticut's approved ESSA plan, please visit https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/ESSA/august_4_ct_consolidated_state_essa_plan.pdf.

^C For a complete overview of legislation from the 2023 regular legislative affecting education, please see: Moran, J.D., & Callahan, J. (2023). *2023 Acts Affecting Education (2023-R-0144)*. Hartford, CT: Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research. Retrieved from https://www.cga.ct.gov/olr/Documents/year/AA/2023AA-0144_2023%20Acts%20Affecting%20Education.pdf.

Statewide Education Policy Changes

State Department of Education & State Board of Education

- **Publishing School District Receipts, Expenditures, and Statistics**¹⁵

Section 1 of Conn. Acts 23-167 requires the CSDE to publish and report on district revenue and expenditure data. With the implementation of this law, families and education stakeholders will be able to compare data across districts, which can also help state and local policymakers more informed decisions.

- **Accountability:** Under the legislation, school superintendents must provide district receipts, expenditures, and statistics to the commissioner of the CSDE by September 1 of each school year.
- **Transparency:** By February 15, 2024, and every year after, the CSDE must publish each district's receipts, expenditures, and statistics broken out by education program type, expense function, expense object, and funding source on its website. The CSDE is required to publish data that can be compared between districts and schools by using the above requirements annually as of February 15, 2025. The CSDE is also required to publish student enrollment and demographic statistics as of October 1 of the year the report was filed.

- **Alliance Districts**¹⁶

Sections 4 and 5 of Conn. Acts 23-167 allows Alliance Districts to use funds provided through the Alliance District grant to establish Family Resource Centers (FRCs) in elementary schools to benefit families and students in their district. The law also requires Alliance District improvement plans to be publicly available on the CSDE's website to provide transparency around how each Alliance District plans to support its students to become college and career ready.

- **Transparency:** Under the legislation, the use of Alliance District funds has expanded. Alliance Districts can now allocate funds toward establishing FRCs in elementary schools. The CSDE must also publish each Alliance District's improvement plan on its website.

- **New Required Training for Board of Education Members**¹⁷

Section 2 of Conn. Acts 23-167 requires the CSDE to develop and implement an annual training for new board of education members. This training aims to better prepare board of education members for the important roles they will play in their district's education system, and help members better understand the inner workings of their districts so they can make the most-informed decisions to best support students.

- **Accountability:** The CSDE is required to collaborate with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education to provide, develop, and implement an annual training program for new board of education members. This yearly training must include, at least: the roles and responsibilities of board members, duties and obligations of a board of education, and school district budgeting and education finance.

Special Education

- **Administrative Hearings for Special Education Disputes¹⁸**

Section 47 of Conn. Acts 23-137 makes changes to administrative hearing law proceedings. These changes will allow the State to provide students with disabilities and their families, as well as special education stakeholders, with the issues raised and what the outcomes are.

- **Transparency:** Administrative hearing officers must promptly index and publish their hearing decisions.

- **Interpreters and Translated Documents at PPT Meetings¹⁹**

Section 39 of Conn. Acts 23-137 requires schools to provide translated documents and interpreters for Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings, which will help multilingual students and their families have necessary information in their preferred language so they can make the best decisions concerning their education.

- **Accountability:** Aligning with federal requirements, Connecticut statute now requires an interpreter at PPT meetings and for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to be translated upon request.

- **Special Education Complaints Filed with the State²⁰**

Section 15 of Conn. Acts 23-150 requires the CSDE to provide online summaries of complaints filed with the Department. Much like the disputes brought to the administrative hearing board above, the State's public summary of complaints filed will provide students with disabilities and their families, as well as special education stakeholders, greater access and information about what special education concerns are being levied across the state.

- **Transparency:** Any special education complaints made to the CSDE must be summarized and redacted, then posted online.

Task Forces, Working Groups, and Studies

- **Alliance District Effectiveness Report²¹**

Section 2 of Conn. Acts 23-208 requires the CSDE to develop a report on the effectiveness of the Alliance District program. This will allow for an analysis of the current structure of the Alliance District program to determine its overall effectiveness. Through this report, legislators will be provided information and recommendations on ways to improve the Alliance District program for students.

- **Accountability:** The CSDE must submit a report to the Appropriations and Education Committees by January 1, 2026 about the effectiveness of the Alliance District program. This report should also include any recommendations for changes to the program.

- **Commission to Study Education Funding and Accountability Measures²²**

Section 36 of Conn. Acts 23-167 establishes the Building Educational Responsibility with Greater Improvement Networks (BERGIN) Commission to study Connecticut's education funding system and the accountability measures currently in place. This work will provide legislators information and analysis on the state's current education funding system and accountability measures to help them make informed decisions about how to improve the education of students in Connecticut.

- **Accountability:** In regards to the Alliance District program, the Commission is specifically charged with:
 - Analyzing the process for how boards of education develop Alliance District plans and how those plans are reviewed and approved by the commissioner of the CSDE;
 - Making recommendations for narrowing the focus of or replacing Alliance District plans;
 - Considering removing the withholding provision of Alliance Districts' equalization aid grant;
 - Analyzing the feasibility of independent financial audits of expenditures for districts in the Alliance District program;
 - Analyzing the feasibility of establishing guidelines for hiring non-classroom personnel for Alliance Districts; and
 - Researching possible interventions the CSDE may take in the operation of Alliance Districts.
- **Transparency:** The Commission is required to submit a report to the Appropriations Committee on the portion of its study focused on funding for local and regional boards of education, charter schools, and magnet schools — along with their findings and recommendations — by February 1, 2024. The remainder of the Commission's study must be submitted to the Education Committee by January 15, 2025.

School Choice Policy Changes

- **Charter School Enrollment Criteria**²³

Section 14 of Conn. Acts 23-150 focuses on charter school enrollment criteria for applicants who are in need of special education or other related services. The change aims to allow for a more equitable approach to charter school lotteries for students with different needs.

- **Accountability:** Charter schools are prohibited from asking or considering a student's need for special education or other related services when the student applies for the charter school. Charter schools are also prohibited from considering a student's special education status as part of the school's lottery system.

- **Charter Schools and Educational Interests of the State**²⁴

Sections 43 and 44 of Conn. Acts 23-160 explicitly require charter schools to uphold the educational interests of the state in the same way that local and regional public school districts and other public school types are required to. This change clarifies the responsibilities of charter schools and provides a recourse for parents and community members if a charter school does not implement the educational interests of the state.

- **Accountability:** Parents or community members may now file complaints with the State Board of Education against a charter school if they feel the school has failed or is unable to implement the educational interests of the state.

Endnotes

¹ Erkkilä, T. (2020). Transparency in Public Administration. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1404>

² Loeb, S., & Figlio, D. (2011). School accountability. In E. A. Hanushek, S. Machin, & L. Woessmann (Eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, Vol. 3 (pp. 383-423). San Diego, CA: North Holland.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Conn. Acts 23-167 § 1.

⁵ Conn. Acts 23-167 § 2.

⁶ Conn. Acts 23-137 § 39.

⁷ Conn. Acts 23-208 § 2.

⁸ Conn. Acts 23-150 § 14.

⁹ Conn. Acts 23-160 §§ 43-44.

¹⁰ Paul, C.A. (2016). Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. *Social Welfare History Project*. Retrieved from <http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/education/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-of-1965/>.

¹¹ The Hunt Institute. (2016). *Evolution of Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1964-2015*. Cary, NC: Duke University, Sanford School of Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://www.hunt-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Development-of-the-Elementary-and-Secondary-Education-Act-August-2016.pdf>.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). Next Generation Accountability System. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Performance/Performance-and-Accountability/Next-Generation-Accountability-System>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (2019). *Connecticut Consolidated State Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/ESSA/august_4_ct_consolidated_state_essa_plan.pdf?la=en.

¹⁵ Conn. Acts 23-167 § 1.

¹⁶ Conn. Acts 23-167 §§ 4-5.

¹⁷ Conn. Acts 23-167 § 2.

¹⁸ Conn. Acts 23-137 § 47.

¹⁹ Conn. Acts 23-137 § 39.

²⁰ Conn. Acts 23-150 § 15.

²¹ Conn. Acts 23-208 § 2.

²² Conn. Acts 23-167 § 36.

²³ Conn. Acts 23-150 § 14.

²⁴ Conn. Acts 23-160 §§ 43-44.