

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 Open Choice Program

- 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 2018-19 school year, more than 3,000 students participated in the Open Choice program.
- 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.
- If student demand for participation in the Open Choice program exceeds available seats, the Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) operate regional lotteries to determine participation.

District Participation

- Districts in the Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and New London areas are currently eligible to send and receive students from participating districts in their respective region.
- 47 districts are currently participating in the Open Choice program.
- 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.

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.
- 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.
 - These grant amounts increase as the percentage of Open Choice students in the receiving district increases.
- 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.
 - 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.
 - All RESCs, except for the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), receive \$1,300 per student for transporting Open Choice students.
 - CREC receives \$2,000 per student for student transportation in support of the *Sheff v. O'Neill* stipulated agreement.
- Sending districts are responsible for additional costs associated with Open Choice students' special education services.
 - Specifically, the sending district is responsible for the difference between the reasonable cost of special education and the Open Choice grant amount.

Pilot Program for Danbury and Norwalk

- Beginning with the 2022-23 school year, the Open Choice program will be expanded for up to 50 students from Danbury and 50 students from Norwalk.
- Danbury students may attend school in the following school districts: New Fairfield, Brookfield, Bethel, Ridgefield, and Redding.
- Norwalk students may attend school in the following school districts: Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, Weston, and Westport.
- 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.
- For fiscal year 2023, the CSDE will provide a \$4,000 per-student grant to each district receiving Danbury or Norwalk students. For fiscal year 2024 and each year after, the CSDE will provide receiving districts with per-student grants based on the Open Choice program's per-student grant structure.

Sources

Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-266aa.

S.B. 1202 as amended by LCO Nos. 10933, 11000, 11007, 11013: An Act Concerning Provisions Related to Revenue and Other Items to Implement the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023. Gen. Assembly. (Ct. 2021 Special Session).