Introduction

Over the past 10 years, the needs of Connecticut students have changed. While the overall enrollment in Connecticut’s public schools has decreased by approximately 47,000 students, the needs of students have increased. In the 2019-20 school year, 42 percent of Connecticut public school students qualified for free or reduced price lunch (an indicator for low-income students), as compared to 33 percent in the 2010-11 school year. Additionally, the percentage of Connecticut students who are English Learners (ELs) also increased from six percent in 2010-11 to eight percent in 2019-20.

Districts that educate the greatest percentages of low-income students, English Learners, and students with disabilities also educate the largest number of these higher-need students. These districts also tend to have larger percentages of non-White students. However, the districts serving these students often do not receive funding that reflects the needs of their student population. This inequity occurs due to the varying ability of communities in Connecticut to pay local education costs.

Ultimately, this has resulted in a consistent mismatch between district needs and district resources with districts that serve larger populations of higher-need students receiving less funding than their lower-need peers. Additionally, Connecticut’s higher-need, lower-wealth districts tend to serve more non-White students than the state’s lower-need, higher-wealth districts.

This policy briefing details the current mismatch between student needs and per-student spending in Connecticut’s local public school districts, and examines some of the factors that contribute to this mismatch.

Definition of Need

For the purpose of this policy briefing, student need is defined at the district level as the percent of students classified as having at least one of the following types of needs:
- Low-income students, as determined by qualifying for free or reduced price lunch (FRPL)
- English Learners (ELs)
- Students receiving special education services

While additional measures of need exist, these three measures were chosen because they have been used, at one time or another, in the calculation of state education aid to municipalities, and are available from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE).
Furthermore, research has shown students in the above categories require funding at a higher level than their non-need peers to achieve at a level similar to their non-need peers.¹

¹ Duncombe & Yinger (2005) note: “Both scholars and policy makers have recognized that it costs more to achieve any given level of student performance when the students are disadvantaged than when they are not” (p.513). For English Learners, Gándara & Rumberger (2008) conclude “English Learners and other linguistic minority students, do require additional resources, above and beyond those of all other students” (p. 145).


Student Need Demographics

The distribution of Connecticut students by type of need is graphed and mapped in this section. These graphs and maps show the distribution of need across Connecticut’s local public school districts. These graphs compare the percentage of higher-need students enrolled in a local school district with the actual number of enrolled students classified as having that specific need. The maps show the total number of students in a local public school district who are classified as higher-need. This analysis finds those districts that educate the greatest percentage of higher-need students also educate the largest number of higher-need students. The highest number of low-income students, ELs, and students with disabilities are consistently concentrated in only a few districts across the state.

Low-income Students

The largest concentrations of poverty are located in the state’s largest school districts — Waterbury, Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven. The districts serving the highest percentages of low-income students are New London, Waterbury, Hartford, Meriden, New Britain, and Windham. In each of these districts, more than 70 percent of enrolled students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRPL).
Number of Students Eligible for FRPL per District, 2019-20 School Year
English Learners
In the last decade, the percentage of Connecticut public school students who are ELs has increased slightly, from six percent to eight percent. However, some districts have seen significant increases in the percentage of their students who are ELs, while other districts have experienced no increase or a decrease. The local public school districts serving the largest number of ELs are Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, Danbury, and Waterbury. The districts serving the largest percentages of ELs are Windham, Danbury, New London, Hartford, and Bridgeport. Over the past 10 years, these districts have seen an average total increase in their EL student populations of 2.1 percent.
Students with Disabilities
The percentage of Connecticut students identified as requiring special education services has increased from 12 percent to 16 percent over the past decade.9 Students requiring special education services include students diagnosed as having learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism, speech and language disabilities, emotional disturbances, and other qualifying medical diagnoses.

Unsurprisingly, given their size, the local public school districts serving the largest number of students with disabilities are Bridgeport, Hartford, Waterbury, and New Haven.10 However, the districts serving the highest percentage of students with disabilities are Norfolk, Sharon, Barkhamsted, and Colebrook.11
Number of Students with Disabilities per District, 2019-20 School Year
Non-White Students in Connecticut

This section focuses on the distribution of Connecticut students enrolled in local public schools by race. The graphs and maps show the distribution of non-White students across Connecticut. This analysis finds a majority of non-White students are concentrated in only a few districts.

The percentage of Connecticut non-White students has increased from 37 percent to 47 percent over last 10 years. The local public school districts with the largest number of non-White students are New Haven, Bridgeport, Hartford, and Waterbury. The local public school districts serving the largest percentages of non-White students are Bloomfield, Hartford, East Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven. Each of these districts serves an enrollment that consists of over 85 percent non-White students. Of all non-White students in the state, a little over 50 percent are educated in only 10 districts.

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8 CSDE reports the race/ethnicity of students in a district by categorizing them into groups. The groups include American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, Hispanic/Latino, and two or more races. Non-White is the sum of all race/ethnicity groups, except for White.

Non-White Students & Higher-Need Students

This section examines the relationship between non-White students and higher-need students throughout Connecticut’s local public schools. These graphs compare the percentage of higher-need students enrolled in a local school district with the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same district.

The findings of this analysis are as follows:
- There is a positive correlation between the percentage of low-income students a district serves and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same district.
- There is a positive correlation between the percentage of ELs a district serves and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same district.
- There is a slight positive correlation between the percentage of students with disabilities a district serves and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same district.

Low-income Students

There is a positive correlation between the percentage of low-income students a district serves and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same district. The scatter plot below shows the relationship between the percentage of low-income students a district serves (on the horizontal axis) and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the district (on the vertical axis). Some districts have very high percentages of low-income students and very high percentages of non-White students. These districts are shown in the top right corner of the chart below and are highlighted in red.
**English Learners**

There is also a positive correlation between percentage of ELs a district serves and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same local school district. The scatter plot below shows the relationship between the percentage of ELs in a district (the horizontal axis) and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the district (on the vertical axis). Some districts have high percentages of ELs and very high percentages of non-White students. These districts are shown on the right-hand side and colored in red.
Students with Disabilities
There is a slight positive correlation between the percentage of students with disabilities in a district and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same local school district. The scatter plot below shows the relationship between the percentage of students with disabilities in a district (on the horizontal axis) and the percentage of non-White students enrolled in the same local school district. Some districts with high percentages of students with disabilities and very high percentages of non-White students are Bloomfield, Hartford, East Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven. These districts are shown in orange. Some smaller, wealthier districts, such as Norfolk, Sharon, Barkhamstead, Colebrook, and Eastford, serve higher percentages of students with disabilities but also have low percentages of non-White students. These districts are shown in the bottom right corner and are colored in green.

Relationship Between Percentage of District Non-White Students and Percentage of District Students Who Require SpEd Services, 2019-20 School Year

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Mismatched Needs & Resources in Local School Districts

Connecticut’s education finance system does not fully account for student learning needs. As a result, districts serving the highest-need students often do not receive funding that reflects the needs of their student population. This section examines the relationship between student needs and resources in Connecticut’s local public school districts, and highlights the inequity that occurs between lower-need, wealthy districts and higher-need, less affluent districts.

To examine the relationship between need and resources in Connecticut public school districts, the level of analysis is the total spent per student at each local public school district. To measure district spending, this policy briefing uses the Connecticut Public Schools Expenditure Report provided by the CSDE. In Connecticut, districts are not required to report the amount spent per pupil on students with additional learning needs. Additionally, this analysis only examines local public school districts.

Included in this section are three charts detailing the relationship between the amount of money spent per student in each local school district for the 2018-19 school year and the level of student need present in that district for the same school year. (Spending data from the 2018-19 school year was used for the visualizations, as this is the most recent data year available.)

The findings of this analysis are as follows:

- There is no correlation between the amount of money a district spent per student and the percentage of low-income students the district serves.
- There is no correlation between the amount of money a district spent per student and the percentage of ELs the district serves.
- There is no correlation between the amount of money a district spent per student and the percentage of students with disabilities the district serves.
- There is no correlation between the amount of money a district spent per student and the percentage of non-White students in a district.

These findings are the case even though research, cited previously in this policy briefing, has detailed the need for additional funding for higher-need students to achieve at levels equivalent to their non-need peers.

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D Per-student spending is used in this analysis, as opposed to per-student funding, because it provides a more accurate view of how much money goes toward a student’s education. In Connecticut, funding for education from state and local sources goes directly to a local school district’s municipal government, rather than to the local school district itself. The municipality then passes allocated education funding to the district. This pass-through can sometimes cause a discrepancy between expected per-student funding and actual per-student spending. Therefore, per-student spending, as reported by the district, has been used in this analysis as a more accurate source of data.
Low-income Students

In Connecticut, there is no correlation between the percentage of low-income students a district serves and the amount it spends. The scatter plot below shows the relationship between the percentage of low-income students a district serves (on the horizontal axis) and a district’s per-student spending (on the vertical axis). Some districts with very low percentages of low-income students have very high per-student spending. These districts are in the upper left corner of the chart and are colored in orange. Oppositely, some districts that serve a high percentage of low-income students have lower per-student spending. These districts are in the lower right of the chart and are colored in green.
**English Learners**

There is also no correlation between the percentage of ELs a local school district serves and the amount it spends per student. The scatter plot below shows the relationship between the percentage of ELs a district serves (on the horizontal axis) and the district’s per-student spending (on the vertical axis). Some districts with very low percentages of ELs have very high per-student spending. These districts are in the upper left corner of the chart and are colored in orange. Oppositely, some districts that serve a higher percentage of ELs have lower per-student spending. These districts are in the lower right of the chart and are colored in green.

![Scatter plot showing relationship between percentage of ELs and per-student spending](image-url)
Students with Disabilities
There is also no correlation between the percentage of students with disabilities in a local school district and the district’s spending per student. The scatter plot below shows the relationship between the percentage of students with disabilities a district serves (on the horizontal axis) and the district’s per-student spending (on the vertical axis). Smaller, wealthy districts such as Sharon, Regional School District 1, Westbrook, and Norfolk all have percentages of students with disabilities above 15 percent and spend at least $26,000 per student. \cite{17,18} Each of these districts also served less than 700 students in the 2018-19 school year. \cite{19}
Non-White Students
There is no correlation between the percentage of non-White students in local school districts and district per-student spending. The scatter plot below shows the relationship between the percentage of non-White students in a district (on the horizontal axis) and the district’s per-student spending (on the vertical axis). Some districts with very low percentages of non-White students also have very high per-student spending. These districts are highlighted below in orange. Additionally, some districts with very high percentages of non-White students have lower per-student spending. These districts are highlighted below in green.

Relationship Between District Per-Student Spending and Percentage of District Non-White Students, 2018-19 School Year

Why the Mismatch?
The mismatch between student learning needs and district resources occurs because Connecticut does not fund school districts based on the complete learning needs of the students they serve. As a result, districts serving the highest-need students often do not receive funding that reflects the needs of their student population, making it difficult for those districts to provide their students with educational opportunities equal to those of their non-need peers.

The following section examines funding of local public school districts and the contributing factors to the current mismatch between student needs and resources, and the inequity that exists between districts across the state.
How are Connecticut’s Local Public School Districts Funded?

In fiscal year 2018, Connecticut public schools spent approximately $11.4 billion dollars educating students. The funding for educating these students is primarily split between state and local funding sources.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, federal funding sources accounted for just 4.2 percent of Connecticut’s public elementary-secondary school system revenue in FY 2018. State sources, on the other hand, accounted for 37.8 percent, and local sources accounted for 58.0 percent of school system revenues.

However, viewing this distribution at the aggregated state level hides significant variations in the share of school district revenue coming from state and local sources.

For example, in 2019, local per-student spending for Bridgeport Public Schools was $3,316 and state per-student spending was $9,834. Conversely, local per-student spending for Westport Public Schools was $22,182 and state per-student spending was $251.
State Education Aid to Municipalities to Fund Public Schools

The State of Connecticut began providing education aid to cities and towns as a result of a 1977 Connecticut Supreme Court decision, *Horton v. Meskill*. In *Horton v. Meskill*, the Court ruled an education funding system that allows “property wealthy” towns to spend more on education with less effort, is a system that impedes children’s constitutional rights to an equal education under the Connecticut Constitution. As a result, Connecticut established the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula in 1988. The goal of this formula is to distribute state education aid to cities and towns in order to make up the difference between the cost of operating a local public school system and each community’s ability to pay those costs through local property tax revenue. Since 1988, the ECS formula has been revised and changed numerous times.

The ECS formula uses three main variables to determine how much a community must raise from its property taxes to pay for its local education costs, and how much the State should contribute to offset these costs:

- **The Foundation**: Intended to represent the estimated cost of educating a Connecticut general education student who does not have any additional learning needs.
- **Need Students**: A calculation that considers the number of students within a town, including groups of students who are typically costlier to educate because they have greater needs.
- **Base Aid Ratio**: Each community’s ability to financially support its public schools.

In October 2017, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a revised ECS formula to be first implemented in FY 2019. The revised formula contains additional need weighting for ELs and for students in districts with concentrated poverty, and made revisions to how each community’s ability to pay for education is measured. This formula is intended to be phased in over 10 years with the phase-in being based on whether a town is projected to receive more or less ECS funding than the town did in FY 2017. The ECS formula is projected to be fully funded in FY 2028.

While the ECS formula distributes funding to local public school districts, Connecticut also uses different funding formulas for magnet schools, charter schools, the Connecticut Technical Education and Career System, agriscience programs, and the Open Choice program. The funding provided by each of these different formulas is not based on student or community needs. Applying the ECS formula to all school types would improve Connecticut’s complex education finance system and help address the educational inequities present in the state. Rather than funding by type of school or program, funding every public school student through the ECS formula would allow Connecticut to distribute funding to all students and districts based on the learning needs of students and the ability of a student’s resident town to support its public schools. However, the Open Choice program would not be included in the ECS formula.
Source of Local Revenue

Local sources accounted for 58 percent of Connecticut school district revenue in FY 2018. Property taxes are the only type of tax Connecticut cities and towns are able to levy to pay for public services. However, Connecticut’s cities and towns have varying amounts of property wealth. The amount of property wealth per resident in each municipality is the Equalized Net Grand List per Capita (ENGLPC), or the equalized amount of total taxable property per resident. While the town of Greenwich had an ENGLPC of $774,735 for grand list year 2018, Hartford’s ENGLPC for the same year was $47,424 — about 16 times less than Greenwich. The following map displays the ENGLPC of each municipality as a color gradient. The darker the color, the higher the ENGLPC for the municipality.

Equalized Net Grand List per Capita by Municipality, 2018
A second measure of town wealth is Median Household Income (MHI). When analyzing this measure, similar disparities are found. For example, the town of Weston had an MHI of $219,083 in 2018, while Hartford’s MHI was $34,338 for the same year. The map below details the wide disparity in MHIs among Connecticut municipalities. The gradient is such that darker colors correspond to higher MHIs.

**Median Household Income by Municipality, 2018**
As a result of the considerable variance in wealth between cities and towns, there are also significant differences in the property tax rates (known as “mill rates”) cities and towns must levy in order to fully fund public services, including funding the local public school district. For example, Putnam’s mill rate is 22.06 mills, while Norwich’s mill rate is 40.28 mills. The map below details the FY 2020 mill rate for each Connecticut municipality. The darker the color, the higher the mill rate for the municipality. The map reveals a large number of towns with similar mill rates, with disparities appearing at the high end of the mill rates, located in Connecticut’s urban cities.

Mill Rate by Municipality, FY 2020
Conclusion

While overall enrollment has decreased by approximately 47,000 students over the last 10 years, Connecticut’s public schools continue to experience an increase in student need. Growth in low-income and EL student populations, as well as a consistent percentage of students with disabilities, coupled with the varying ability of communities to pay local education costs and the lack of responsiveness of state and local funding sources, has resulted in a consistent mismatch between district needs and district resources.

This mismatch is the result of several contributing factors and Connecticut’s overall education finance system. While the Connecticut General Assembly has taken steps toward equitably funding the state’s public school students, Connecticut still lacks a funding method that fully accounts for student needs and allows higher-need districts to be able to provide their students with the same opportunities to succeed as districts that serve students with fewer learning needs.

To fix the funding inequity that exists among local public school districts and resolve the mismatch between student needs and resources, Connecticut must address the local funding inequities that occur between lower and higher wealth towns. Addressing these disparities would allow for the development of a fair funding system based on student learning needs that distributes state education dollars in a transparent, consistent, and predictable manner.

As districts across Connecticut continue to experience growth in their higher-need student populations, inequity and mismatched needs and resources will also persist until districts are funded based on the needs of their students and the ability of the district to support these students. Applying the ECS formula to every public school student would address these inequities, resolve the complexity of Connecticut’s current education finance system, and finally distribute funding to all students and districts based on their needs.
Endnotes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Conn. Gen. Statutes ch. 172, § 10-262h
31 Conn. Acts 17-2 (June Special Session).
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.

36 Ibid.


39 Ibid.