Executive Summary

An evidence-based proposal for improving Connecticut education funding for greater adequacy, equity, and accountability.

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Connecticut spends more per student than all but four states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026), yet it has one of the nation's largest achievement gaps (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025a). The state covers about 36% of the cost of public education against a national average of about 45% (USAFacts, 2026), and local property taxes make up the difference: 54.8% of all school revenue in 2022-23, against 33.2% nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025b). That ties a district's spending to the wealth of its town and turns a funding shortfall into an equity crisis. Our findings suggest the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula is broken, and no amount of tinkering or adjustment for inflation will make it equitable: it is already fully funded, reaching 104.6% of its calculated amount in FY2027, and the inequity remains (School and State Finance Project, 2026).

Raising the state share to 50%, with local and federal revenue held steady, would take about $3.83 billion more, phased in over five, seven or ten years. The first three of our five recommendations meet the three criteria the evidence sets for a redesign: shift resources to the greatest student need, prioritize the instructional core, and address structural costs such as district size. The last two build the state's capacity to see what its taxpayers' money buys.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Distribute new funding to districts by student need, according to district deciles of need, adjusted for town wealth

Current ECS funding stays as a foundation, and no district loses what it receives now. New "benchmark" funding is paid at a single rate of $14,844 per high-needs student to districts in need Deciles 1 through 8; the two lowest-need deciles receive no new money. The largest share goes where need is concentrated: Decile 1 receives $1.41 billion, 36.9% of the total. A district's wealth placement blends grand list and household income equally, not 70/30 as in the state's formula (Moran, 2017); where it sits two or more deciles from the need placement, the district moves two deciles toward its wealth. Elementary, secondary, charter, magnet and technical districts are funded on the same rule: the 71 of them in Deciles 1 through 8 receive $510.2 million.

The evidence: the highest-need districts spend $2,034 less per pupil than the lowest-need districts, and local property tax revenue accounts for more than the whole of that gap (Finding #2). An independent national analysis finds the same pattern: Connecticut's highest-poverty districts receive about $3,800 less in state and local revenue per student than its lowest-poverty districts, while nationally the highest-poverty districts receive slightly more (EdTrust, 2026). The poorest quarter of towns tax themselves for schools at roughly twice the rate of the wealthiest quarter - an education equalized mill rate, education spending per $1,000 of property value, of 20.61 against 10.74 - and still have the least to spend (Finding #10). Bringing the three highest-need deciles down to the statewide median rate, at their current spending, would take $672 million. The proposal clears that floor three times over: Deciles 1 through 3 receive $2.05 billion.

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Recommendation #2: Require 80% of new benchmark funding to reach the instructional core and name the uses it should buy

The instructional core is instruction, student support and instructional support services, as the State Department of Education defines them. Districts now spend a median of 72.5% of per-pupil expenditure on these functions (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2026d), so an 80% requirement sets a rate above current practice. Because new money is at most $3.83 billion against a current $13.81 billion, the statewide share rises only from 72.5% to about 74.1%, and districts keep their flexibility over existing budgets. The rule directs roughly $3.07 billion to teacher compensation and retention, instructional coaching, and proven interventions such as high-dose tutoring and summer learning (De Bruin et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

The evidence: money matters, and what it is spent on matters as much (Jackson et al., 2016). At the same level of need, five districts reached benchmark achievement on budgets that ranged from $19,784 to $35,908 per pupil, a spread of 81% (Finding #5).

Recommendation #3: Capture economies of scale - commission an estimate of the savings, then replace the voluntary regionalization process with a statewide framework for shared services and shared governance

The General Assembly should first commission an estimate of the administrative savings from consolidating districts under 1,500 students. On that estimate, the State should set an enrollment threshold and a timeline and replace the voluntary regionalization process, which fails whenever either town concludes the other gains more, with a statewide framework in which the State names, studies and sets deadlines for candidate mergers. The natural first subjects are the eight secondary regional systems, where 32 boards of education serve students that eight would serve in K-12 towns, and general administration costs more per pupil than in comparable K-12 districts in seven of the eight. A district spending above a per-student threshold on a shareable service, such as transportation, should be required to partner with a neighbor or a Regional Educational Service Center; general administration cannot be shared, because sharing it means sharing governance.

The evidence: districts under 1,500 students spend about $2,700 more per pupil for the same results as larger districts, a premium that has widened from 9.0% in 2018-19 to 13.8% in 2024-25 (Finding #8). General administration costs $824 per pupil in those districts and $583 at 1,500 to 3,000 students, against $431 above 3,000.

Recommendation #4: Commission an independent study of the districts that are currently most successful in converting funding into student outcomes

Fourteen districts top their Reference Groups on efficiency: ten on achievement and four more on growth. The General Assembly should commission an independent party, such as a research university or the School and State Finance Project, to study their leadership, governance and spending, with the State Department of Education supplying the data. Because the state's chart of accounts does not break instructional spending down to specific interventions, Connecticut should also build a planning and spending platform like Michigan's MICIP (Michigan Department of Education, 2026).

The evidence: **Meriden** serves 84.8% high-needs students on $16,977 per pupil and achieved a District Accountability Index (DAI) of 69.6, better than 14 districts spending more than $29,000 per pupil. Yet it remains below the state's achievement benchmark of 75 (Finding #4). Above 60% student need, benchmark achievement has been reached only twice in five years (Finding #6), and only **Vernon** has sustained it (Finding #7). Efficiency is not sufficiency.

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Recommendation #5: Publish Achievement and Growth Return-on-Investment measures alongside the state's existing accountability data

The State Department of Education should publish each district's achievement and growth return-on-investment (A-ROI and G-ROI), its spending per point of DAI and per point of student growth, every year alongside DAI and per-pupil expenditure. Growth shows what a district's instruction added, whatever students knew on arrival. The evidence: four of the fourteen most efficient districts appear only when growth is measured (Finding #4).

What the redesign does not yet know

The distribution rule sets what each district receives, not what reaching benchmark achievement would cost. For the highest-need deciles it cannot yet be calculated, because almost no district in them has reached the standard. Districts at or above 70% high needs carry an "educational overburden" that current resources cannot meet (Finding #10), after years of flat real funding while the share of high-needs students rose (Finding #9). Pricing that target, and replacing the twenty-year-old District Reference Groups with comparisons built on current data (Finding #3), is the work the state should commission next.

Full proposal, in a policymaker and analyst edition and a shorter superintendent edition, with every district's figures: https://datadaptive.ai/funding-proposal (Carter & Adamowski, 2026). Analysis: https://datadaptive.ai/district-comparison-tools (Datadaptive LLC, 2026).

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