

An enhancement to district regionalization proposals, aimed at increasing options for students and addressing declining enrollment.

# Expanding Open Choice

There's an important conversation taking place in CT about school district regionalization, and equity must be at the heart of this discussion. Why do some towns have the capacity to give greater educational opportunity than others? When schools have extra classroom seats available, why shouldn't students from neighboring towns fill them? This policy solution addresses both questions.

## A Policy Solution: Expanding Open Choice

As an enhancement to regionalization efforts, expanding the state's already impressive Open Choice program seems logical. It can create access and opportunity for students, and it can also address declining enrollment in smaller districts if they host students from other neighborhoods.

## What is Open Choice?

Connecticut's Open Choice program allows students to attend school in any participating district within the region in which they reside. This state program, established in 1996, was designed to enhance diversity among student populations along racial, ethnic, and economic lines. It gives parents the power to select the school that best serves the needs of their individual child. It also creates an alternative for smaller districts with declining enrollment to increase their student numbers and maintain their facilities and staff.

In 2018, Open Choice served:

- 49 districts
- Over 3,000 students

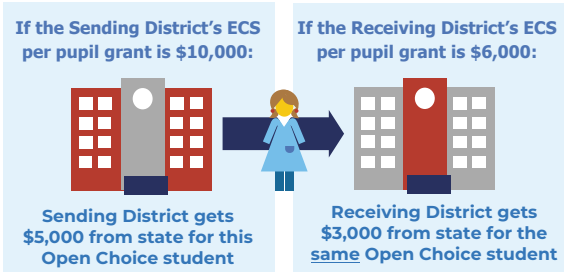
**50/50 Split**

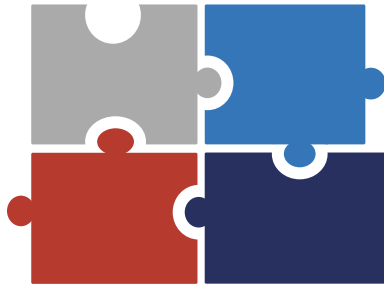
Both receiving and sending districts currently get half of their ECS funding for each Open Choice student.

Last year, 49 local school districts and more than 3,000 students participated in the Open Choice program. Receiving districts opt into this program by offering seats to students from other districts. The state provides financial incentives to encourage their participation. Then, Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs) administer lotteries to determine which students will participate.

## Current Costs of Open Choice:

- ECS Per Pupil Grant: 50% to both sending + receiving districts
- State Incentive # 1 (Ranges from \$3,000-\$8,000 per Open Choice student): A tiered per-pupil grants based on the percentage of the receiving district's student population that participates in Open Choice.
- State Incentive #2 (\$6,000 per Open Choice student): A district with a total Open Choice enrollment of more than 4,000 students can receive this one-time incentive by increasing its Open Choice enrollment more than 50%.
- Transportation Grant from State (Avg. \$1,300 per Open Choice student)





# How Can Connecticut Expand Open Choice

## (1) Solve the Regional Obstacle: Expand regional participation in open choice and incentivize districts with declining enrollment to absorb additional students.

CT state law currently allows districts in specific regions to participate in the Open Choice program (Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and New London).

**This law should be clarified to permit all regions to participate in Open Choice.**

Districts with excess seats should especially be encouraged to participate so that they can host students from other districts and increase their sources of funding.

(This idea is cost neutral to districts.)

Permit all regions to participate in open choice.

Stop funding receiving and sending districts at 50% their ECS allocations.

## (2) Solve the Funding Obstacle: Give the receiving Open Choice districts the full ECS grant per student.

Currently, for each participating Open Choice student, both the receiving and the sending districts split the state's ECS funding allocation, despite receiving districts bearing the full cost of educating the child. This can de-incentivize receiving districts from accepting additional students.

**We could stop splitting ECS funds between receiving and sending districts in the Open Choice program, as a way to encourage receiving districts to welcome more out of district students.**



For more information,  
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### About Education Reform Now CT

Education Reform Now CT is an organization that supports elected leaders who are champions of public education, providing policy expertise and advocacy. Together, we advance ideas and practices based on progressive values--with a goal of increasing equity, protecting civil rights and the social safety net, and promoting great educational opportunities for all--as part of realizing the American Dream.