

EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Written By

Connecticut Center for
Educational Excellence

Research By

University of New Haven's
Liberty Initiative

Sponsored By

Yankee Institute



MAY 2023

Expanding Educational Opportunity

A new study published by the Connecticut Center for Educational Excellence (CTCEE), the University of New Haven's Liberty Initiative and Yankee Institute for Public Policy leaves no doubt that many of our students within our public school system are falling behind.

In *Connecticut K-8 Educational Achievement Gap*, two researchers from the University of New Haven's Liberty Initiative, Abigail Fleisig and Shauna Curran, provide data and information on educational outcomes and spending for school districts across the state. They find that although Connecticut has some of the best performing schools in the nation, the disparities in academic performance within the state are some of the widest in the nation, as well.

In this paper, we will review highlights from their findings and discuss how expanding educational opportunity — through organizations like CTCEE — for low-income households in Connecticut can begin to close the Education Gap.

Overall Performance in Connecticut's Public Schools

According to U.S. News & World Report, Connecticut ranks first in College Readiness across all fifty states. Our state ranks third in PreK - 12 performance, sixth in overall education environment, and thirteenth in high school graduation rate. Connecticut also had the second highest median expenditures per student in the nation — demonstrating that our state and local governments spend generously on education compared to the rest of the country.

But the results of the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated all the spending wasn't producing optimal results for Connecticut's public schools. In Grade 4 mathematics, students lagged behind 19 states and were tied with Virginia, Tennessee, Idaho, Colorado and North Carolina; Grade 4 reading outcomes lagged seven states, tying with Pennsylvania, Hawaii, Montana, Nebraska and Ohio. In Grade 8 mathematics, Connecticut students trailed 19 states, tying with Kansas, Texas, Idaho and Pennsylvania. Grade 8 reading was a bright spot; Connecticut students trailed only New Jersey, Massachusetts and Utah.

Differences in Performance within Connecticut's Public Schools

There are significant differences in educational outcomes in Connecticut's public schools, which can be seen most notably when measured by household income. The study uses eligibility for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) as a proxy to income.

Eligibility for the NSLP's free and reduced-price lunches is determined by a student's family income in relation to the federally established poverty level. Students from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level qualify to receive free lunches; those from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level qualify to receive reduced-price lunch. For the period July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022, for a family of four, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$34,450 and 185 percent is \$49,025.

The data below reveal a clear disparity in academic achievement between high- and low-income households in Connecticut’s public schools. Students in families eligible for free lunches perform worse than students in families for subsidized lunches, who in turn perform worse than students in families ineligible for the NSLP. (Figure 1)

A series of charts from the study also show significant differences in educational outcomes between students in NSLP-eligible and non-eligible families attending public schools in states across the country. Connecticut’s gaps are well worth noting. Our state had the nation’s second largest gap in Grade 8 mathematics; seventh highest gap in Grade 4 mathematics; ninth highest gap in Grade 8 reading; and sixteenth highest gap in Grade 4 reading.

Differences in Spending within Connecticut’s Public Schools

Figure 1: Performance Index, 2021-22, State of Connecticut, Free/Reduced Price Meal Eligibility

Free/Reduced Price Meal Eligibility	ELA Performance Index	Math Performance Index	Science Performance Index
Free	53.6	46.3	50.6
Reduced	59.7	53.3	56.1
Non-Subsidized	71.2	66.7	68.1

Connecticut Government Definitions:

- The Performance Index is the average performance of students in a subject area (i.e., English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, or Science) on the state summative assessments.
- The Performance Index ranges from 0-100 and is reported for all students and for students in each individual student group.
- Connecticut’s ultimate target for a Performance Index is 75.

Analysis Proxy Definitions:

- The Performance Index is a proxy for educational achievement in the following analysis.
- Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch through the NSLP represent low-income students.
- Ineligible students for the NSLP (non-subsidized lunch) represent high-income students.

Although differences in family incomes appear to have a consistent effect on student academic performance in Connecticut’s public schools, disparities in school per-pupil spending have less of an effect. The data in the following chart (Figure 2) provide a snapshot of per capita personal income school district spending and academic performance for Fairfield, Hartford, Litchfield, Middlesex, New Haven, New London, Tolland and Windham Counties.

**Figure 2: Connecticut County, CT School District,
National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Eligibility, by
Performance Index, by Net Current Expenditures per Pupil (NCEP)**

County Name	Per Capita Personal Income by County, Annual, 2021	School District Name	NCEP 2020-2021	Free/Reduced Price Meal (NSLP) Eligibility (2-level)	ELA Performance Index 2021-2022	Math Performance Index 2021-2022	Science Performance Index 2021-2022
Fairfield	\$127,391	Fairfield School District	\$20,782	Eligible For NSLP	64.3	59.2	59.1
				Not Eligible For NSLP	77.9	73.9	73.0
Hartford	\$70,168	Hartford School District	\$21,756	Eligible For NSLP	46.2	39.1	44.6
				Not Eligible For NSLP	58.4	52.3	57.5
Litchfield	\$74,852	Litchfield School District	\$23,387	Eligible For NSLP	67.9	62.9	66.5
				Not Eligible For NSLP	72.4	71.9	72.9
Middlesex	\$74,453	Middletown School District	\$20,948	Eligible For NSLP	55.3	45.4	50.5
				Not Eligible For NSLP	68.6	59.3	61.4
New Haven	\$64,643	New Haven School District	\$18,870	Eligible For NSLP	48.6	38.9	44.3
				Not Eligible For NSLP	59.2	50.7	52.8
New London	\$63,877	New London School District	\$18,454	Eligible For NSLP	47.1	39.3	46.4
				Not Eligible For NSLP	64.9	55.6	63.3
Tolland	\$63,722	Tolland School District	\$16,972	Eligible For NSLP	61.6	59.4	58.2
				Not Eligible For NSLP	70.8	68.9	66.1
Windham	\$55,261	Windham School District	\$19,415	Eligible For NSLP	48.9	43.0	48.8
				Not Eligible For NSLP	61.9	56.9	64.8

Connecticut Government Definitions:

- The Performance Index is the average performance of students in a subject area (i.e., ELA, Mathematics, or Science) on the state summative assessments.
- The Performance Index ranges from 0-100 and is reported for all students and for students in each individual student group.
- Connecticut's ultimate target for a Performance Index is 75.

Analysis Proxy Definitions:

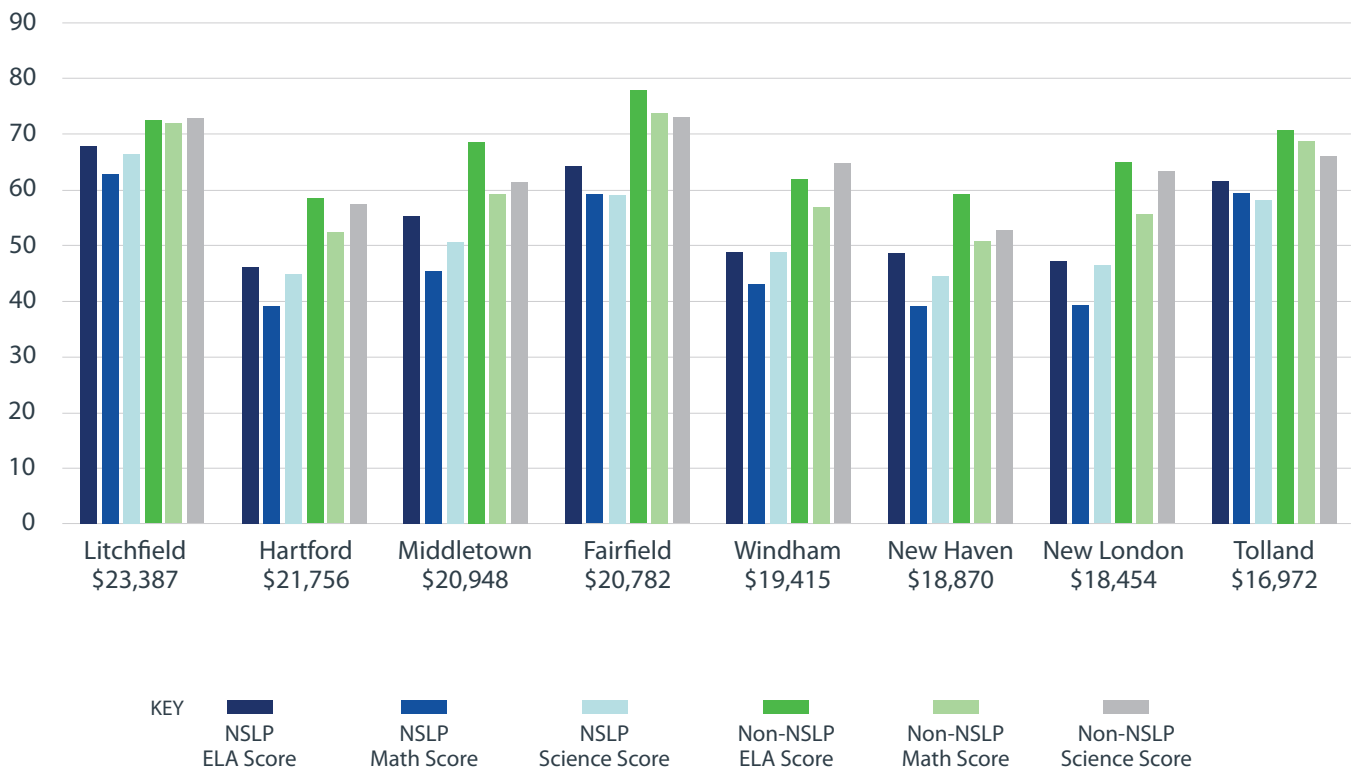
- One school district was selected for each county in Connecticut.
- The Performance Index will be used as a proxy for educational achievement in the following analysis.
- Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch through the NSLP represent low-income students.
- Students not eligible for the NSLP represent high-income students.

The next chart (Figure 3) provides the same data, sorting districts from left to right based on their per pupil spending.

Litchfield County has the highest spending per student. Although it achieves the highest NSLP eligible scores across all three subject areas, it trails Fairfield for non-NSLP eligible students. Hartford, meanwhile, boasts the second-highest spending across the schools surveyed but finishes last in nearly every topic for both NSLP and non-NSLP student performance. Tolland spends by far the least per pupil yet ranks in the top three across all academic performance scores. Litchfield and Tolland have the widest gap in per-pupil spending between districts, yet have the narrowest achievement gap in each category across all districts.

The takeaway: There is little discernible correlation between state education spending and academic outcomes.

Figure 3: Academic Performance by Topic, District Spending, and NSLP Eligibility



Elevating Low-Income Household Academic Performance

Connecticut is fortunate to have some of the nation's highest performing schools, inspiring teachers, supportive parents and enthusiastic students. Our public high schools in Westport (Staples), New Canaan, Darien, Greenwich, Avon, Farmington, Glastonbury and elsewhere are among the best in the country. Dr. William G. Kaelin Jr., who grew up in Fairfield and graduated from Roger Ludlowe High School (now Fairfield Ludlowe High School), won the Nobel Prize for Advances in Physiology or Medicine in 2019 to highlight just one notable alumnus. Where Connecticut can improve is in finding ways to close the Education Gap by elevating the academic achievement of students in low-income households.

That is where the Connecticut Center for Educational Excellence (CTCEE) comes in.

Many of the parents of children in low-income households face challenges that high-income households do not confront. They also lack access to funds that would enable them to enroll their children in schools that might better fit the unique needs of the student and his or her family. The best way to improve educational outcomes over the long term would be to enhance economic opportunity and mobility across Connecticut. To address the immediate and urgent needs of families, however, Connecticut must do more to expand educational opportunity.

CTCEE offers support, leadership and innovative solutions in partnership with families and communities to ensure that all children receive an excellent education that honors their uniqueness.

Any student in Connecticut whose household's gross adjusted income is at or within 250% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines is eligible to apply for a CTCEE scholarship. A parent or guardian may choose any accredited private or parochial school in Connecticut, so long as the chosen school verifies the student's acceptance prior to final approval of a scholarship. Parents or guardians are responsible for the balance of the annual tuition charged by the school of their choice. CTCEE will verify attendance and "good standing" of the student in September and January of each academic year.

Such programs have demonstrated high levels of success across Connecticut. They have simply been too limited in scope. An eight-year study conducted by CTCEE's CEO demonstrated that scholarships, educational leadership and resulting policy recommendations were unavailable for many of Connecticut's low-income families. So CTCEE has offered its scholarship application to parents of low-income K-8 students across Connecticut, without geographic limit.

Early indications are that the demand for alternative options is growing rapidly in Connecticut. In less than a month after CTCEE opened, 700 qualified students submitted applications from 76 Connecticut cities, with parents choosing 36 accredited private schools.

Success Stories

Students, parents and school administrators are eager to share success stories resulting from the limited scholarships that have previously been available to certain Connecticut residents.

When students have been asked, “How has your scholarship helped you?” their responses have included the following:

- “My scholarship has helped me understand that someday I can be a lawyer to help other parents and kids just like me.” —Bridgeport Student
- “We got to go to school all through the pandemic. Someday, I am going to teach students just like my favorite teachers.” —Hartford Student
- “I will be a doctor some day because I want to help people, the way I have been helped.” —Stratford Student
- “I now understand how hard my mom works to help me attend my private school — this makes me work even harder, and I will attend college someday.” —New Haven Student
- “We love going to school and have asked our dad if we can stay for after-school programs just to be with our teachers and friends a little longer.” —Branford Students
- “Every day, I learned more English, and I taught my family what I learned. I just graduated 8th grade and am already thinking of college and becoming a teacher.” —Easton Student
- “My mom and dad could not get help for me — I could not understand how to learn reading, writing or math and could not pass the tests for my grade. Some wonderful people said they would help get a scholarship to help my parents and get a school to help me learn — no matter what. My parents thought we did not qualify for help. I am now in my grade — thanks to wonderful teachers and a principal who takes time every day to help me. They showed me what it means to know God loves even a kid who was not passing. I am doing great — I am even helping my friends at school and learning to play the piano. I am going to college someday. With God, all things are possible.” —Windsor Student

Educational opportunity transforms children’s lives — especially for students from low-income households or in homes where English is not the primary language.

Conclusion

Connecticut’s public schools have left children from low-income households behind. The success stories from scholarship recipients who attend non-traditional private schools offer hope for making a positive change in the trajectories of those children’s lives, which will have an impact not only for them, but for all of us. Many Connecticut families who seek an education where their child’s unique needs and abilities are understood could benefit immensely from the assistance, counsel and opportunity organizations like CTCEE provide. We are working to hasten the day when all parents have a voice in their children’s education, and the opportunity to choose the path that offers them the best, most hopeful path forward in life.

About The Authors

Carolanne Marquis

Chief Executive Officer, Connecticut Center for Educational Excellence

Dr. Marquis joins Yankee Institute to become CEO of CTCEE with a wealth of experience in educational and administrative leadership. Among other positions, she has served as Executive Director of the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation and Interim President, Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President of Keuka College. Dr. Marquis holds a B.S. from North Park College/Northwestern University and a PhD in Administrative Education/Organizational Management from the University of Chicago.

Bryce Chinault

Director of External Affairs, Yankee Institute

Mr. Chinault joined Yankee Institute after nearly a decade of working in federal and state level policy analysis at the George Washington University Regulatory Studies Center and the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. In those roles, Chinault worked directly with members of Congress, executive agencies, governors, state legislators, and local officials to engage on a diverse range of policy topics and enact positive reforms for everyday people across the country. A native of Cambridge, Wis., Chinault moved to Connecticut to be closer to his wife's family in her hometown of Newtown. Chinault earned a Master of Public Policy degree from George Mason University and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

To learn more about our program, the success stories of our students
and the commitment of CTCEE and Yankee Institute —
please visit www.ctcee.org or contact carolanne@ctcee.org / 585.472.5221.

