
OLR Bill Analysis

sSB 1458

AN ACT CONCERNING CHANGES TO THE COMMISSIONER'S NETWORK OF SCHOOLS AND ALLIANCE DISTRICT PROGRAMS.

SUMMARY

This bill sunsets the education commissioner's network of schools program by prohibiting the commissioner from (1) adding any more schools to the program after July 1, 2025, or (2) extending the time that already participating schools can stay in the program. Under the program, participating schools receive intensified State Board of Education (SBE) supervision and direction.

The bill also renames the alliance district program as the opportunity district program and reduces the number of participating school districts from 36 to 15, while still using the same method to select districts.

It also creates a new category of "legacy alliance districts" that includes any of the former alliance districts. For three types of grant-related laws (including a "hold harmless" provision on reduced education cost sharing (ECS) funds), the bill ensures that any district that was formerly an alliance district (whether an opportunity or legacy alliance district under the bill) maintains the same benefits it had as an alliance district.

For two other laws (grants for curricula, training, and related textbooks and reading readiness), the bill replaces alliance district with opportunity district, which reduces the number of eligible districts from 36 to 15.

The bill makes numerous conforming and technical changes.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2025

§§ 1 & 2 — SUNSETS THE COMMISSIONER’S NETWORK OF SCHOOLS PROGRAM

The bill sunsets the education commissioner’s network of schools program through which currently she selects up to 25 low-achieving schools each school year to receive intensified SBE supervision and direction for three years with an option for an additional year or two.

The bill prohibits the education commissioner from (1) adding any more schools to the program after July 1, 2025, or (2) extending the time that schools already participating can stay in the program. The bill permits schools already in the program to finish their three-year terms, but does not allow, beginning July 1, 2025, any districts currently in the program to continue with a previously granted additional year or two.

Currently, the program sets steps the commissioner, school district turnaround committees, and local and regional boards of education must take to improve academic achievement. Each school’s turnaround committee must create and implement a turnaround plan, based on a turnaround model it chooses. Current law requires the commissioner to give participating schools funding and technical and operational support.

Beginning July 1, 2025, the bill requires the commissioner to conduct an evaluation of a school’s participation in the program before the end of its third year of participation. Under current law, the commissioner must conduct this evaluation to determine whether the school is prepared to exit the program.

The bill requires the board for the participating school to develop, in consultation with the commissioner and subject to SBE approval, a plan to transition the school back to full control by the local or regional board of education. Currently, the board develops this plan if the commissioner determines the school will exit the network.

§ 3 — REVISING AND RENAMING THE ALLIANCE DISTRICT PROGRAM AS THE OPPORTUNITY DISTRICT PROGRAM

The bill revises the alliance district program, renaming it the opportunity district program and reducing the number of participating

districts from 36 to 15. Under current law, an alliance district is a school district for a town with one of the 33 lowest accountability index (AI) scores, plus any previously designated alliance districts (total of 36) (see BACKGROUND). The bill also uses the AI to select the 15 districts with the lowest AI scores as opportunity districts.

The bill eliminates the definition of alliance districts. (It is unclear how this impacts a number of other laws using the definition that are not changed by the bill, such as the aspiring educators' diversity scholarship program for graduates of high schools in alliance districts (CGS § 10-156ii) and the alliance district grant for general improvements to school buildings (CGS § 10-265h).)

Under the bill, the designation as opportunity districts begins in FY 26 and lasts for two years. The bill ends the alliance district designation at the end of FY 25.

Improvement Plan and Withholding Funds

Under the alliance district program, each participating school district must submit an improvement plan to the State Department of Education (SDE) for approval before the comptroller releases the district's alliance funding (i.e. a portion of the annual ECS grant that these districts receive). The plan must detail how a district will use its alliance funding to improve student achievement. In addition to the plan, the law permits the alliance district funding to be spent according to SDE's minority candidate certification, retention, or residency year program and with any SBE guidelines (CGS § 10-262u). The bill applies these same requirements to the opportunity districts and no longer applies them to alliance districts.

Under the bill, the portion of the annual ECS grant that the comptroller withholds until plan approval is the increase in a district's ECS grant compared to what it received in FY 12. This is the same method used for the original alliance districts created in 2012 (but the most recent alliance district designation only affecting a few towns used FY 22).

The bill also applies the current improvement plan components to the opportunity districts and no longer applies them to alliance districts. These components include, in part, (1) a tiered intervention system for the district's schools based on their needs; (2) ways to strengthen reading programs to ensure reading mastery in grades K-3; (3) additional learning time, including extended school day or year programs run by school personnel or external partners; and (4) a talent strategy that includes teacher and school leader recruitment and assignment and career ladder policies that draw on district-approved guidelines for a teacher evaluation.

Also carried over to the opportunity districts is the existing program's SDE interventions and oversight to help districts carry out their plans.

Educational Reform Districts Repealed

The bill also eliminates the term "educational reform district," which is a district that has one of the lowest 10 AI scores. (It is unclear how this impacts a number of other laws using the definition that are not changed by the bill, such as the wraparound services grant for educational reform districts (CGS § 10-265p).)

Districts With the 50 Lowest Accountability Index Scores

The bill also allows districts that are among the 50 with the lowest AI scores but have not been designated an opportunity district, to request technical assistance or other specialized interventions from SDE for help with providing academic support services to students.

§§ 4-6 — CONFORMING AND TECHNICAL CHANGES FOR ECS GRANTS AND GRANTS IN LIEU OF TAXES

By substituting opportunity districts and legacy alliance districts for alliance districts in the following provisions, the bill does not change which districts these provisions apply to. Taken together, opportunity districts and legacy alliance districts encompass all the current alliance districts.

ECS Grant (§§ 4 & 5)

The bill applies to opportunity districts and legacy alliance districts the following ECS grant provisions:

1. a “hold harmless” provision that guarantees alliance districts a grant amount that is at least as much as they received in the previous fiscal year and
2. the “base aid ratio” used to calculate ECS grants that sets a minimum floor of 10% for an alliance district’s wealth factor, instead of 1% for other districts (districts with higher ratios receive higher per student grant amounts).

By law, the state ECS grant is calculated annually based on the number and demographics of students enrolled in a district (those eligible for free and reduced meals and English language learners are weighted more in the grant calculation) and the town’s property wealth (towns with higher property wealth receive less per student than those with less property wealth).

Grants in Lieu of Taxes (§ 6)

The bill also substitutes opportunity districts and legacy alliance districts for alliance districts in the state grants in lieu of taxes to certain properties, when determining which towns will be considered a Tier I municipality (those towns with an equalized net grand list per capita of under \$100,000) (CGS § 12-18b(d)). Tier I towns are eligible for a higher grant payment.

§§ 7 & 8 — REPLACES ALLIANCE DISTRICTS WITH OPPORTUNITY DISTRICTS FOR TWO PROGRAMS

In two programs, the bill replaces alliance districts with opportunity districts, which reduces the number of districts eligible to participate from 36 to 15.

The two programs are:

1. grants for new curricula, training on using the curricula, and related supporting textbooks and materials (§ 7), and

2. the reading readiness program that provides tiered supports in early literacy (§ 8).

BACKGROUND

Accountability Index Scores

The “accountability index” for a school district or an individual school is the score resulting from multiple weighted measures that (1) include the mastery test scores (i.e. performance index) and, if appropriate, high school graduation rates and (2) may include academic growth over time, attendance and chronic absenteeism, postsecondary education and career readiness, enrollment in and graduation from institutions of higher education and postsecondary education programs, civics and arts education, and physical fitness (CGS § 10-223e(a)).

Related Bill

SB 1 (File 637), favorably reported by the Education Committee, repeals the commissioner’s network of schools and the alliance district program among other changes.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Education Committee

Joint Favorable

Yea 42 Nay 0 (03/28/2025)