



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



TO: Clerk of the Senate
Clerk of the House of Representatives

FROM: Charlene M. Russell-Tucker
Commissioner of Education

DATE: January 3, 2025

SUBJECT: Report on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

In accordance with Section 9 of Public Act 21-199 of the Connecticut General Assembly, enclosed is a report that outlines the Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) [efforts and successes in advancing FAFSA completion](#), particularly in high-need high schools across Connecticut. The report also discusses strategies for ensuring ongoing FAFSA completion and provides recommendations for the State to consider continued investment in the CSDE's FAFSA initiatives.

In response to this legislation, the CSDE established the Postsecondary Success Workgroup. The report is being submitted on behalf of this workgroup to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children and education.

If you have any questions, please contact Laura Stefon, Chief of Staff at (860) 713-6493.

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Improving Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Completion Rates: Connecticut's Progress and Path Ahead

A Report to the Connecticut General Assembly

**Submitted by the Connecticut State Department of Education's
Postsecondary Success Workgroup**

January 2025

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Introduction

In accordance with [Section 9 of Public Act No. 21-199](#), this report outlines the Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) [efforts and successes in advancing completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#), particularly in high-need high schools across Connecticut. It also discusses strategies for ensuring ongoing FAFSA completion and provides recommendations for the State to consider continued investment in the CSDE's FAFSA initiatives. In response to this legislation, the CSDE established the Postsecondary Success Workgroup. A list of the Postsecondary Success Workgroup members can be found in [Appendix A](#). The report is being submitted on behalf of this workgroup.

Improving postsecondary readiness and enrollment of Connecticut's public-school students has long been a priority of the CSDE. One of the pillars of this work is the Connecticut FAFSA Challenge. Launched in January 2020, the FAFSA Challenge educates students and families about the critical importance of completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form and incentivizes maximum completion in high schools. The FAFSA plays a crucial role in the college admissions process, serving as a key milestone that opens doors to higher education which, for many students, has historically remained inaccessible due to financial constraints. Notably, the FAFSA is essential for accessing up to \$20,000 in federal and state aid like Pell Grants and Roberta B. Willis scholarship funding, not to mention institutional aid that can cover up to the full cost of attendance at many public and private institutions. In Connecticut, students are eligible to attend a community college essentially for free, but only if they complete the FAFSA. To date, the CSDE has invested an average of \$375,000 per year in the Challenge (\$1.5 million total) using federal COVID relief funding.

Improving FAFSA completion rates has only grown more important in recent years as research has found a strong correlation between completing the FAFSA and enrolling in college¹. Since its implementation, the FAFSA Challenge has steadily increased Connecticut's FAFSA completion rates, reaching a statewide high of nearly 62 percent in the 2022-23 school year. And, based on recent data from the CSDE, the program is working. In 2023, Connecticut witnessed a rebound

¹ <https://www.ncan.org/page/NationalFAFSACompletionRatesforHighSchoolSeniorsandGraduates#:~:text=Completion%20of%20the%20Free%20Application,immediately%20enroll%20in%20postsecondary%20education>

from the pandemic in the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college within one year of graduation.²

By engaging more students around the FAFSA, high schools have helped over 20,000 students each year realize the many benefits of a postsecondary education, including higher lifetime earning potential and opportunities for personal and professional growth. This is essential for modernizing and expanding our state's economic growth, which depends on 70 percent of Connecticut's working-age adults to obtain some form of a postsecondary work credential.³ CSDE data show that there remain significant enrollment disparities between students with and without high needs.⁴ While the FAFSA Challenge has narrowed these gaps considerably, this work needs to continue to ensure all students can get a high-quality higher education, earn a competitive wage, and participate in our state's evolving economy.

The CSDE recommends the FAFSA Challenge be continued into the 2025-26 school year and beyond. Funding for this program will be crucial in future years as thousands of twelfth grade Connecticut students prepare to complete the FAFSA as part of their high school graduation requirements, starting with the class of 2027, per [Sections 9 and 10 of Public Act No. 24-45](#).

² https://public-edsight.ct.gov/performance/college-enrollment-dashboard?language=en_US

³ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/office-of-the-governor/news/20201028-governors-workforce-council-strategic-plan.pdf>

⁴ https://public-edsight.ct.gov/performance/college-enrollment-dashboard?language=en_US

The Connecticut FAFSA Challenge

In January 2021, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) launched its first FAFSA Challenge, engaging 26 high schools across 16 school districts. The program was designed to spark and support innovations to increase FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment rates. In subsequent years, the CSDE expanded the FAFSA Challenge to more schools through an annual average investment of \$375,000, prioritizing schools that served disproportionately high populations of students receiving free- or reduced-price meals as well as schools with historically lower FAFSA completion rates. In the 2021-22 school year, 40 schools from 19 districts participated; in 2022-23, 57 schools from 35 districts participated; and, in 2023-24, 54 schools from 37 schools participated. In 2024-25, the fifth year of the program, 51 schools from 37 districts are participating. A list of participating schools can be found in Appendix B.

Participating high schools receive mini grants, virtual training opportunities through uAspire, monthly coaching sessions with postsecondary professionals from the Connecticut RISE Network, and invitations to attend monthly Communities of Practice. Additionally, all high schools can connect with local community-based organizations to receive ancillary virtual and in-person support from trained financial aid administrators. For example, schools and families have requested assistance through the [FAFSACT.org](https://www.fafsa.org) portal, in which local college financial aid administrators work directly with families on completing the FAFSA.

One of the most valuable investments the CSDE has made in boosting FAFSA completion rates is via a data-sharing agreement between the CSDE, the Office of Higher Education (OHE), and individual school districts. Through this agreement, local education agencies can securely access real-time information on the FAFSA completion status of each twelfth-grade student enrolled in their district. This information is updated daily for district and school administrators with approved access privileges. A [public-facing dashboard](#) can also be accessed through the CSDE's EdSight portal, showing aggregate FAFSA completion rates for each high school. This is updated on a weekly basis for members of the public.

Since its inception, the FAFSA Challenge has proven to be an effective program. Schools participating in the 2020-21 FAFSA Challenge increased FAFSA completion rates by an average of nearly four percentage points. By comparison, the statewide FAFSA completion rate increased by 0.3 percentage points and the country's FAFSA completion rates declined by over four percentage

points during the same period. Moreover, while the statewide FAFSA completion rate for high needs student groups changed little from 2020-21 to 2021-22, among Challenge schools with a preponderance of enrollment from students with high needs, the completion percentage increased by nearly three percentage points.

Over subsequent years, schools participating in the FAFSA Challenge exhibited similar growth in FAFSA completion rates, elevating the statewide rate to a high of 61.8 percent in 2022-23. See Table 1 below. Delays in launching the FAFSA, as well as a series of technical challenges with completing the updated form, contributed to a decline in state and national completion rates during the 2023-24 school year. With the launch of the new 2025-26 FAFSA on November 18, 2024, the success of this year will hinge on any similar completion barriers that might emanate from the overhaul of the new form.

Table 1: Summary of Connecticut FAFSA Challenge Results, 2020-2024

Year	# of Districts	# of Schools	Challenge Growth (FAFSA Challenge schools only)	State Growth (All high schools)	Statewide FAFSA Completion Rate
2020-2021	16	26	+ 4.0 points	+ .3 points	54.9%
2021-2022	19	40	+ 8.1 points	+ 1.5 points	56.4%
2022-2023	35	57	+ 6.9 points	+ 5.4 points	61.8%
2023-2024	37	54	-5.1 points*	-3.6 points	58.2%

*2023-24 data as of July 2024

Strategies for FAFSA Completion Success

The CSDE has identified several strategies that are critical for supporting schools, students, and families to learn about and complete the FAFSA.

- 1. Funding to drive innovation.** Thanks to federal COVID relief funding, the CSDE has invested \$1.5 million over four consecutive years in FAFSA completion, averaging \$375,000 per year. The CSDE used this funding to provide small grants to high schools, averaging \$6,000 per school. Funds were used to provide stipends to counselors, teachers, and administrators to perform duties above and beyond the regular school day requirements; host evening events for families to complete the FAFSA; and offer incentives and recognize students who successfully completed the FAFSA. Additionally, the CSDE used funding to award a contract to the Connecticut RISE Network, that led monthly Community of Practice sessions for educators; provided one-on-one coaching to school counselors unfamiliar

with the FAFSA; facilitated trainings in partnership with uAspire; and, created new resources for families. During Communities of Practice, one Challenge school was publicly celebrated each month for achieving the largest month-over-month completion growth rate.

- 2. Partnerships and Community Building.** Partnerships with various community-based organizations was another element critical to the success of Connecticut's FAFSA completion efforts. As mentioned, the RISE Network successfully led a statewide community of practice for Challenge schools to review data, share promising practices, and discuss strategies for overcoming barriers and obstacles. Moreover, through a partnership with the #CTCollegeBound initiative and [FAFSACT.org](#), schools could request college financial aid administrators attend and lead FAFSA family nights in schools to guide caregivers through the FAFSA completion process. Schools partnered with other organizations as well, including Conntac, ECMC The College Place Connecticut, and nearby institutions of higher education.

This form of personalized assistance has been shown to have significant impacts on boosting FAFSA submissions and, in turn, college enrollment. Research by [Bettinger, Long, and Oreopoulos \(2012\)](#) found that when families received information on tuition costs, combined with in-person assistance from individuals trained in FAFSA completion, students were 8 percentage points more likely to complete two years of college.

- 3. School-based FAFSA Task Forces.** Some of the most successful schools formed school-based teams or "task forces" to work directly with students on the FAFSA. These teams were comprised of school counselors, administrators, classroom teachers, career and college coordinators, and other staff who dedicated several hours per week outside of typical contracted work hours. Task force members were assigned a caseload of students to target and support with FAFSA completion, and they received hands-on training from uAspire, the Connecticut RISE Network, and other organizations.
- 4. Real-Time FAFSA Completion Data.** Thanks to a partnership with the Office of Higher Education (OHE), educators and members of the public have access to a [FAFSA dashboard](#) that shows FAFSA completion rates for nearly every single high school in the state of Connecticut. Updated weekly, users can filter the dashboard to view school and district completion rates based on the school's percent of students with high needs, the school type, and other features unique to Connecticut. Additionally, school and district

administrators have access to real-time completion statuses of each of their students, equipping them with the ability to focus on students who still have an incomplete FAFSA on hand. Finally, schools used the dashboard to engage in a friendly competition with each other, competing to be at the top of the leaderboard and finish the school year with the highest completion rate.

Recommendation for the State of Connecticut

The CSDE is appreciative of the \$500,000 allocation of ARPA funding by the Connecticut General Assembly in [Public Act No. 23-204](#), which allowed the state to continue supporting FAFSA completion through the 2024-25 school year. It has made an unequivocal difference in schools. By prioritizing resources for FAFSA completion, the state has demonstrated the power of a small investment in opening doors to pathways that previously were unattainable due to financial constraints. However, funding for this program will be depleted by August 2025, and there is currently no additional federal or state funding reserved for its continuation. Connecticut has established itself as a national leader in FAFSA completion thanks to this funding, but absent sustained support, there is no guarantee this trend will continue. Dedicated funding is essential for high school counselors, college and career coordinators, and other school staff to ensure that more students have the support in place to fulfill this critical postsecondary milestone.

Additionally, dedicated funding will be crucial in future years as FAFSA completion becomes a requirement for high school graduation, starting with the class of 2027, per [sections 9 and 10 of Public Act No. 24-45](#). **As such, the Postsecondary Success Workgroup recommends that the Connecticut General Assembly include funding in the next biennium for the Department to continue investing in FAFSA completion.**

Appendix A:

CSDE Postsecondary Success Workgroup Members

Ram Aberasturia, Division Director, Connecticut Office of Higher Education

Jason Adler, School Counselor, Waterford Public Schools

Karen Amaker, Director of Workforce Development and Career Readiness, Connecticut State Department of Education

Katherine Atkinson, Consultant, Connecticut State Department of Education

Victoria Bozzuto, Director of Career and Transfer Readiness, Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System

Brad Columbus, Principal, LEARN

Emily Byrne, Executive Director, Connecticut Voices for Children

Thomas Coley, Interim Campus Chief Executive Officer, Connecticut State Community College

Kate Dias, President, Connecticut Education Association

Aynsley Diamond, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs, Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System

Todd Dyer, Director of School Counseling, Avon School District

Chaka Felder, Founder/Executive Director Higher Heights Youth Empowerment Programs, Inc.

Ajit Gopalakrishnan, Chief Performance Officer, Connecticut State Department of Education

Karen Hynick, Acting Provost and Vice President, Connecticut State Community College

J. Seth Korn, Director of School Counseling, Newington School District

Leonard Lockhart, Executive Committee President, Connecticut Association of Boards of Education

Mona Lucas, Assistant Vice President for Enrollment, University of Connecticut

Glenn Lungarini, Executive Director, Connecticut Association of Schools

John Maduko, President, Connecticut State Community College

Shannon Marimon, Executive Director, ReadyCT

Kelonda Maul, Executive Director, Waterbury Promise

Patricia Melton, President, New Haven Promise

Keith Norton, Chief Strategic Planning Officer, Connecticut State Department of Education

Emily Pallin, Executive Director, Connecticut RISE Network

Fran Rabinowitz, Executive Director, Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents

Gwendolyn Samuel, Founder, Connecticut Parents Union

Renee Savoie, Consultant, Connecticut State Department of Education

John Scianimanico, Director of Special Projects, Connecticut State Department of Education

Richard Sugarman, Former President, Hartford Promise

Chris Todd, Executive Director, Office of Early College Programs, University of Connecticut

Kim Traverso, Consultant, Connecticut State Department of Education

Sharon Veatch, School Counseling Department Chair, Regional School District 1

Jennifer Widness, President, Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges

Appendix B: Participating FAFSA Challenge Schools, 2020-2025

2020-2021 FAFSA Challenge Schools

District	School
Ansonia School District	Ansonia High School
Bridgeport School District	Bassick High School
Bridgeport School District	Bridgeport Military Academy
Bridgeport School District	Central High School
Bridgeport School District	Warren Harding High School
Danbury School District	Danbury High School
East Hartford School District	Synergy Alternative Program
East Haven School District	East Haven High School
Hartford School District	Bulkeley High School
Hartford School District	Hartford Public High School
Hartford School District	Weaver High School
Meriden School District	Orville H. Platt High School
Naugatuck School District	Naugatuck High School
New Britain School District	New Britain High School
New Britain School District	New Britain High School Satellite Careers Academy
New Haven School District	High School In The Community
New Haven School District	James Hillhouse High School
New Haven School District	Wilbur Cross High School
New London School District	New London High School
Norwalk School District	P-TECH Norwalk
Norwich Free Academy District	Norwich Free Academy
Putnam School District	Putnam High School
Waterbury School District	Crosby High School
Waterbury School District	John F. Kennedy High School
Waterbury School District	Wilby High School
West Haven School District	West Haven High School

2021-2022 FAFSA Challenge Schools

District	School
Ansonia School District	Ansonia High School
Bridgeport School District	Bassick High School
Bridgeport School District	Bridgeport Military Academy
Bridgeport School District	Central High School
Bridgeport School District	Warren Harding High School
Bristol School District	Bristol Eastern High School
Capitol Region Education Council	Civic Leadership High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	A. I. Prince Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Bullard-Havens Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	E. C. Goodwin Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Eli Whitney Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Emmett O'Brien Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	H. C. Wilcox Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Henry Abbott Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Howell Cheney Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	J. M. Wright Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Norwich Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Oliver Wolcott Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Platt Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Vinal Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	W. F. Kaynor Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Windham Technical High School
Danbury School District	Danbury High School
East Windsor School District	East Windsor High School
Enfield School District	Enfield High School
Griswold School District	Griswold High School
Hartford School District	Hartford Public High School
Montville School District	Montville High School
New Haven School District	James Hillhouse High School
New Haven School District	Wilbur Cross High School
New London School District	New London High School
Norwalk School District	Brien McMahon High School
Norwalk School District	Norwalk High School
Norwich Free Academy District	Norwich Free Academy

District	School
Stamford School District	Westhill High School
Torrington School District	Torrington High School
Waterbury School District	Crosby High School
Waterbury School District	John F. Kennedy High School
Waterbury School District	Wilby High School
Windham School District	Windham High School

2022-2023 FAFSA Challenge Schools

District	School
Bridgeport School District	Warren Harding High School
Bridgeport School District	Central High School
Bristol School District	Bristol Central High School
Capitol Region Education Council	Civic Leadership High School
Capitol Region Education Council	Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts High School - Full Day
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	J. M. Wright Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	W. F. Kaynor Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Henry Abbott Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Emmett O'Brien Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Oliver Wolcott Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Ella T. Grasso Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Howell Cheney Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Eli Whitney Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Bullard-Havens Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Vinal Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Windham Technical High School
Danbury School District	Danbury High School
Derby School District	Derby High School
East Haven School District	East Haven High School
East Windsor School District	East Windsor High School
Goodwin University Educational Services (GUES)	Connecticut River Academy at Goodwin University
Great Oaks Charter School District	Great Oaks Charter School
Griswold School District	Griswold High School
Hamden School District	Hamden High School
Hartford School District	Great Path Academy at MCC
Hartford School District	Weaver High School
Hartford School District	Bulkeley High School
Hartford School District	Hartford Public High School
Killingly School District	Killingly High School
Manchester School District	Manchester High School
Middletown School District	Middletown High School
Naugatuck School District	Naugatuck High School
New Britain School District	New Britain High School

District	School
New Haven School District	Metropolitan Business Academy
New Haven School District	New Haven Academy
New Haven School District	Wilbur Cross High School
New Haven School District	James Hillhouse High School
New London School District	New London High School
North Stonington School District	Wheeler High School
Norwalk School District	Norwalk High School
Norwich Free Academy District	Norwich Free Academy
Old Saybrook School District	Old Saybrook Senior High School
Plainfield School District	Plainfield High School
Plainville School District	Plainville High School
Putnam School District	Putnam High School
Regional School District 06	Wamogo Regional High School
Regional School District 19	E. O. Smith High School
Stamford School District	Stamford High School
Stamford School District	Westhill High School
Stratford School District	Stratford High School
Stratford School District	Bunnell High School
Vernon School District	Rockville High School
Waterbury School District	Wilby High School
Waterbury School District	Crosby High School
Waterbury School District	John F. Kennedy High School
Waterford School District	Waterford High School
Windham School District	Windham High School

2023-2024 FAFSA Challenge Schools

District	School
Ansonia School District	Ansonia High School
Bethel School District	Bethel High School
Bridgeport School District	Warren Harding High School
Bridgeport School District	Bassick High School
Bridgeport School District	Central High School
Bristol School District	Bristol Central High School
Capitol Region Education Council	Academy of Science and Innovation
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Bullard-Havens Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Emmett O'Brien Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Henry Abbott Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	J. M. Wright Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Vinal Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	W. F. Kaynor Technical High School
Danbury School District	Danbury High School
East Hartford School District	East Hartford High School
East Haven School District	East Haven High School
East Windsor School District	East Windsor High School
Goodwin University Educational Services (GUES)	Connecticut River Academy at Goodwin University
Griswold School District	Griswold High School
Hamden School District	Hamden High School
Hartford School District	Bulkeley High School
Hartford School District	Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy
Hartford School District	Hartford Public High School
Hartford School District	Weaver High School
Killingly School District	Killingly High School
Middletown School District	Middletown High School
Naugatuck School District	Naugatuck High School
New Britain School District	New Britain High School
New Haven School District	Wilbur Cross High School
New Haven School District	Cooperative High School - Inter-District Magnet
New Haven School District	James Hillhouse High School
Norwalk School District	Norwalk High School

District	School
Norwalk School District	Brien McMahon High School
Norwich Free Academy District	Norwich Free Academy
Old Saybrook School District	Old Saybrook Senior High School
Plainfield School District	Plainfield High School
Plainville School District	Plainville High School
Putnam School District	Putnam High School
Regional School District 19	E. O. Smith High School
Stamford School District	Stamford High School
Stamford School District	Westhill High School
Stratford School District	Bunnell High School
Stratford School District	Stratford High School
The Gilbert School District	The Gilbert School
Thompson School District	Tourtellotte Memorial High School
Torrington School District	Torrington High School
Vernon School District	Rockville High School
Waterbury School District	Crosby High School
Waterbury School District	John F. Kennedy High School
Waterbury School District	Wilby High School
Waterford School District	Waterford High School
Watertown School District	Watertown High School
West Hartford School District	Hall High School
Windham School District	Windham High School

2024-2025 FAFSA Challenge Schools

District	School
Ansonia School District	Ansonia High School
Bethel School District	Bethel High School
Bridgeport School District	Warren Harding High School
Bridgeport School District	Bassick High School
Bridgeport School District	Central High School
Bristol School District	Bristol Central High School
Capitol Region Education Council	Academy of Science and Innovation
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Emmett O'Brien Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	J. M. Wright Technical High School
Connecticut Technical Education and Career System	Vinal Technical High School
Danbury School District	Danbury High School
East Hartford School District	East Hartford High School
East Haven School District	East Haven High School
East Windsor School District	East Windsor High School
Goodwin University Educational Services (GUES)	Connecticut River Academy at Goodwin University
Griswold School District	Griswold High School
Hamden School District	Hamden High School
Hartford School District	Bulkeley High School
Hartford School District	Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy
Hartford School District	Hartford Public High School
Hartford School District	Weaver High School
Killingly School District	Killingly High School
Middletown School District	Middletown High School
Naugatuck School District	Naugatuck High School
New Britain School District	New Britain High School
New Haven School District	Wilbur Cross High School
New Haven School District	Cooperative High School - Inter-District Magnet
New Haven School District	James Hillhouse High School
Norwalk School District	Norwalk High School
Norwalk School District	Brien McMahon High School
Norwich Free Academy District	Norwich Free Academy
Old Saybrook School District	Old Saybrook Senior High School

District	School
Plainfield School District	Plainfield High School
Plainville School District	Plainville High School
Putnam School District	Putnam High School
Regional School District 19	E. O. Smith High School
Stamford School District	Stamford High School
Stamford School District	Westhill High School
Stratford School District	Bunnell High School
Stratford School District	Stratford High School
The Gilbert School District	The Gilbert School
Thompson School District	Tourtellotte Memorial High School
Torrington School District	Torrington High School
Vernon School District	Rockville High School
Waterbury School District	Crosby High School
Waterbury School District	John F. Kennedy High School
Waterbury School District	Wilby High School
Waterford School District	Waterford High School
Watertown School District	Watertown High School
West Hartford School District	Hall High School
Windham School District	Windham High School