

***CT Insider:* Hartford schools embrace esports to help students connect, learn: 'There's a sense of camaraderie'**

By [Crystal Elescano](#), Staff Writer Jan 24, 2026



Davontae Keaton, right, high-fives Lij Thompson, center, after a big scoring moment as Leo Saunders, rear looks on, during the esports competition with University High School on Friday, January 23, 2026, at the Annie Fisher Montessori School in Hartford.

Jim Michaud/Hearst Connecticut Media

HARTFORD — Two teams faced off in the video game Rocket League at Annie Fisher Montessori Magnet School on Friday, competing for a spot in the Hartford Public Schools esports tournament championship.

The three-versus-three match, held in the school's esports lab, had students from University High School of Science and Engineering compete against students from Annie Fisher Montessori Magnet School.

University High School won the match and returned to play 15 minutes later against students from Bulkeley High School.

The games were part of a district-wide tournament involving seven schools. Only two teams advanced from Friday night's matches to the tournament's final, which will be held Saturday afternoon at Great Path Academy.

Rocket League, the game at the center of the competition, is similar to soccer but played with rocket-propelled cars, according to Bob Burbank, esports coach at University High School of Science and Engineering.

Burbank said his students also compete during the week against schools in other districts and even outside the state.

For many students, esports has become an important part of school life.

Leo Saunders, a 12-year-old student at Annie Fisher, said he joined the school's esports club last year after developing an interest in video games.

"I was playing Super Smash Bros. all the time," Saunders said. "I heard about the club and wanted to join."

While the current tournament focused on Rocket League, Saunders said previous competitions have included Super Smash Bros. and NBA 2K. He said students practice together and compete against other schools to prepare for tournaments.

Annie Fisher esports coach Eliasin Robles said his students typically play on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. He said esports helps students build relationships, even in competitive environments.

“One of the things I really like about esports players is that even when they’re yelling, there’s a sense of camaraderie,” Robles said. “Even with their opponents, they are building that connection.”

Robles said esports has created a community among students, where they learn how to win and lose and build connections with their peers. Even when competitions are held online, he said, students remain excited to play with one another.

He said esports has grown, with students earning scholarships and being recruited by both colleges and teams.

Beyond competition, Hartford Public Schools has integrated esports and gaming into instruction across grade levels, according to Will Cheney, the district’s technology education coach. At the middle school level, Cheney said programming focuses on game design and includes lessons on digital citizenship related to gaming.

At the high school level, Cheney said the district introduced a course this year called Foundations of Gaming Technology, available to freshmen at many schools depending on

staffing. The course draws from foundations of technology and computer science curricula and introduces students to programming, basic robotics and prototyping through a gaming lens. Cheney said the course allows students time to design and conceptualize games while learning about the game industry. It also includes a gameplay component in which students analyze how programming concepts apply to video games, as well as lessons on social-emotional wellness and nutrition for esports athletes. At some schools, more advanced video game design courses are also offered, and the district is exploring ways to incorporate game design into AP Computer Science Principles classes.

Esports is recognized by the Connecticut Board of Education as a sport.

Erin Wilson-Ruff, principal of Annie Fisher, said interest in the esports club has increased among students. “Our attendance has definitely improved, and our discipline referrals are down significantly,” Wilson-Ruff said. “Middle schoolers need a sense of connection, and this is one program that helps students build community, meet new friends and feel connected to the school.”

Hartford Public Schools officially announced its esports program during the 2023–24 school year, though some schools had started clubs earlier. District officials said esports is integrated into the educational experience to support student engagement and learning.

See the article in the *CT Insider* publication [here](#).

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