

PUBLIC HEARING TESTIMONY-HB6493

TO: REP. FLEISHMAN AND SEN. GAFFNEY AND THE MEMBERS OF THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Thank you for considering this bill, Bill No. 6493. AN ACT CONCERNING REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS, and for considering my remarks on the bill.

The vote procedure in RD 11, requiring a majority vote of each member town, results in a small number of Hampton voters holding hostage two and a half towns and denying them the opportunity to make change in RD11. Consistently these Hampton voters, usually under 250, deny the implementation of the goals of the overall majority in the other two towns, and in the district as a whole, some 5500 people.

Over the years many voters have asked for changes and improvements at RD 11 to no avail. "It's a wonderful school, we're just misunderstood" is the Board's slogan, despite the district's falling school population and inadequate academic results. This bill allowing a simple majority of voters in the three towns to decide issues will bring equity to our district. Indeed, if we had had this provision over recent years, perhaps the intransigent Board would have felt less invincible and been more responsive to the needs of the communities.

The legislators will be interested to know that this current bill seems to be the only path to change in RD11. Due to unintended conflicts among a number of statutes pertaining to regional school districts, the only path to significant citizen-initiated change to the operating plan of a regional district requires nine referenda, three in each town. Clearly this is an impossible mission.

The poor quality and great cost of RD11 takes a toll on families, children, and communities. The RD 11 school is classified by the CSDE as a DRG F school, while the three sending towns are classified as DRG E (higher). CSDE statisticians say this is because the RD11 school population is not characteristic of the 3 towns. Many families are sending their children elsewhere, to vo-ag or vo-tech schools, our one and only magnet school in NE CT (performing arts HS in Willimantic) or, at great expense, private and parochial schools. This demographic concentration is perhaps the most appalling consequence of inadequate educational conditions in RD 11.

Additionally our three towns have a much smaller high school population than other towns of their size (3.2% v. 5.5-6%) – because for over a decade the school's well-known accreditation problems have caused families with children to move elsewhere or choose not to buy homes in the district. This demographic distortion does not bode well for the long-term health of our three towns.

I acknowledge recent improvements in school culture and course offerings, but it appears it is too little too late. This year again, based on the district's October 1,2008 school census, the high school grew smaller, by 11 students, a loss of 6% in a single year. The longer term future is also grim: Class of 2012, (this year's 9th compared to last year's 8th) 51 now 42 (-21%); and Class of 2011(this year's 10th) - 42 v 33 (-22%). A slight increase in the middle school population is thus wiped out when students reach the high school grades.

Per pupil costs approach \$19,000 per student (before ECS), the most expensive high school in the state. In a relatively poor part of the state, these costs impoverish other community programs such as recreation, roads and our elementary school budget. We very much need this bill if we are to enable the community's voice to be heard in upcoming referenda on dissolution of the district and reconstitution of the middle school.

Please move this bill forward to consideration by the legislature.

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