

# MORE Commission

## Regional Entities Subcommittee

### Education Policy Working Group

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February, 2016

## Introduction

Education is the single largest expense for each of Connecticut's 169 municipalities. In many cases, especially for small to medium sized communities, education can account for up to eighty-percent of a municipality's budget. Our school districts also contain a high level of administrative expertise and capacity that is, with few exceptions, untapped by the general government side of municipal budgets and operations. Opportunities for intra-town collaborations and regional collaborations are significant. These opportunities can result in increased efficiencies, reduced costs and improved educational outcomes.

The Regional Entities Subcommittee of the MORE Commission was "formed to bring together multiple stakeholders to work together to identify ways to better utilize their regional entities and work in a more cohesive manner with their neighboring communities."<sup>1</sup> The Regional Entities Subcommittee established the Education Policy Working Group following its April 28, 2015 meeting to explore opportunities to gain efficiencies and reduce costs related to local education services. The Working Group, in examining ways to gain efficiencies and reduce costs, was asked to explore partnerships with municipal governments, Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs) and Regional Councils of Governments (COGs). The Working Group met through fall 2015 with the intention of producing policy recommendations for the 2016 legislative session. The Working Group discussed demographics, district consolidation, regional school districts, the role of RESCs, transportation and local and regional policies in more detail. Since fifty-nine percent of state's direct expenditures are budgeted for

education, any changes would impact the state's fiscal health, individual town finances, children and families.

Our recommendations include:

- Improving the collection, quality and dissemination of data essential to decision making and investments of public resources.
- Adding education as a fundamental element of local, regional and state planning fully integrated into the state's Growth Management Principles.
- Incentivizing local school districts to embrace regional options and opportunities.
- Exploring a new means for the efficient use of funds used for the transportation of students.

The goal of these recommendations is to foster closer relationships and partnerships between local government and school districts and their respective regional partners (RESCs and COGs). The opportunities to gain efficiencies in services, reduce current costs and increase the quality and availability of services lie with the development and expansion of these local/regional partnerships.

On a parallel path, the General Assembly's Program Review and Investigation (PRI) Committee conducted and completed a study titled, "Regional Cooperation Between Local Boards of Education."<sup>2</sup> The stated focus of the PRI study is:

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<sup>1</sup> Regional Entities Subcommittee Page of the MORE Commission, <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/more/RegEnt/index.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Regional Cooperation Staff F&R Full Report.pdf

*Regional cooperation between local boards of education can vary widely, from two school districts developing a cooperative arrangement to provide adult education together, to the creation of a regional school district serving children in grades K-12. This study will examine the prevalence, advantages, and disadvantages of such efforts and identify factors related to implementing, replicating, or expanding potentially beneficial regional cooperative efforts<sup>3</sup>.*

The "Main Staff Findings"<sup>4</sup> of the PRI report are:

*Almost all school districts studied participated in at least one cooperative effort in each of the three instructional areas of general education, special education, and professional development. Also:*

- *more instructional areas than larger school districts; however, there are also many cooperative efforts occurring in middle sized school districts*
- *Depending on the school district's geographic area, RESCs played a larger or smaller role in certain special education areas.*
- *School districts in more affluent communities are less likely to partner for physical therapy, occupational therapy, or psychological services.*

*With the exception of pupil transportation, there were generally fewer partnerships between educational entities in the operational areas:*

- *Nearly three-quarters of school districts collaborated on special education pupil transportation*
- *School districts are more likely to partner with local municipalities for cooperative purchasing of, such items as heating oil/gas, and health insurance.*
- *School districts are more likely to partner with local municipalities for administrative and back office functions such as snowplowing, grounds maintenance, and auditing.*

*Superintendents identified factors used in deciding whether to form or continue a collaboration including whether effort:*

- ✓ *saves money or contains costs*
- ✓ *results in efficiencies or improves quality of services*

- ✓ *satisfies a need of the school district*
- ✓ *benefits all collaborating parties*
- ✓ *benefits or positively impacts students*
- ✓ *logistics can be worked out*
- ✓ *meets the needs of local control, politics, and good relationships*
- ✓ *to collaborate is known by the school district*

Keeping in mind the focus of the PRI study, the Education Policy Working Group has attempted to examine the broader issue of municipal-school district efficiencies; however, there will no doubt be overlap between the two studies.

The Education Policy Working Group held multiple meetings and heard presentations from the following speakers:

- Michael Howser, Director - University of Connecticut State Data Center
- Thomas M. Danehy, Executive Director - Area Cooperative Educational Services (Aces)
- Orlando Rodriguez, Associate Legislative Analyst - Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission
- Peter M. Prowda, Retired Connecticut State Department of Education Statistician
- Dianna Wentzell, Commissioner - Connecticut State Department of Education
- Janet C. Fairman, Christine Donis-Keller, University of Maine - Improving Educational Opportunity and Equity Through School District Consolidation In Maine (via video conference)
- Jim Rier, Former Maine Education Commissioner - (via voice conference)

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<sup>3</sup> STUDY SCOPE: Regional Cooperation Between Local Boards of Education, Legislative Program and Investigations Committee, 4/22/15, Page 1 <https://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/docs/2015/PRI%20Scope%20for%20Study%20of%20Regional%20Cooperation%20Between%20Local%20Boards%20of%20Education.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Regional Cooperation Staff F&R Full Report.pdf, PRI Staff Findings and Recommendations Highlights

- Dan Syme, First Selectman, Scotland; Allan Cahill, First Selectman, Hampton; and Bill Rose, First Selectman, Chaplin - Rural/Small Town CEO Perspective
- Paula Colen, Executive Director Of Eastconn and Danuta M. Thibodeau, Executive Director Of Education Connection - Regional Education Service Center Perspective
- Richard A. Huot, Director Of Finance And Operations, Hebron Public Schools - Connecticut Association Of School Business Officials, On Shared Services White Paper
- Michael Zuba, Director Of Planning, Milone And Macbroom - School Enrollment Projections
- Ajit Gopalakrishnan, Chief Performance Officer - Connecticut State Department Of Education

The Education Policy Working Group took the information gained from the presenters, various reports and the committee member's individual knowledge to develop a package of recommendations. These recommendations, most of which will require legislative action, are intended to develop opportunities to improve intra-town collaboration and regionalism - resulting in increased efficiencies and cost savings.

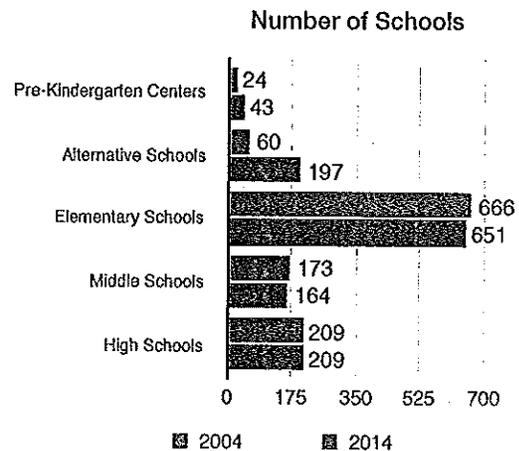
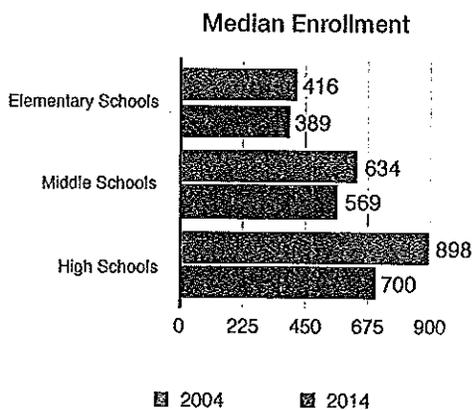
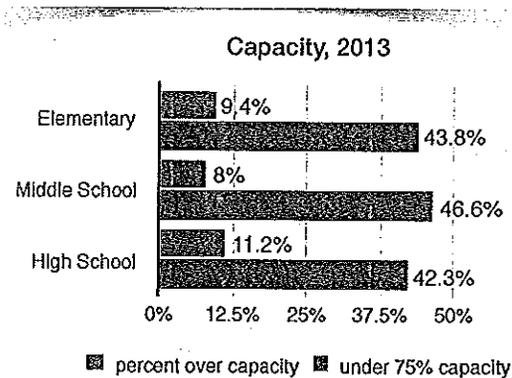
## Findings

### Demographic Trends and Data:

- The Department of Education is about to launch a robust and dynamic data portal covering a wide range of subjects in a retrievable format. This new system has the capacity to provide school districts and others with information heretofore not readily available.
- Accurate data is essential to school system decision making. Some towns, though not a majority, allocate local resources to gain access to otherwise unavailable district data - including enrollment projections. Currently, neither the State nor its regions has a systematic way of documenting and analyzing the scope of projected changes in district or regional enrollment patterns or to provide resources to towns that face the resulting challenges. The State Department of Education provided this data in the past, but is not currently providing enrollment projections. The Connecticut State Data Center at the University of Connecticut creates population projections for the state, COG regions and towns, but does not address school or district enrollment projections.

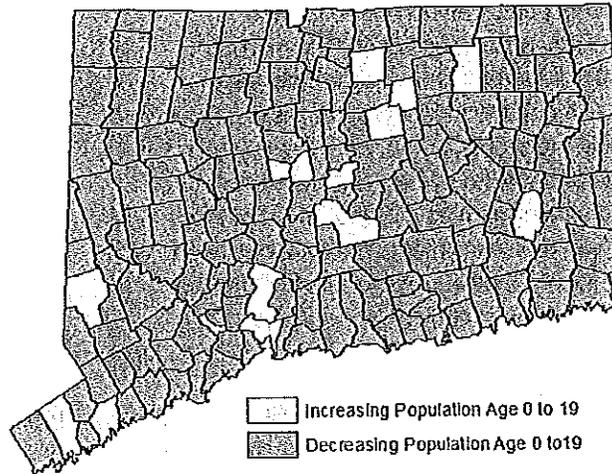
In 2014, there were 202 districts in Connecticut with 542,454 students. The city of New Haven had the largest number of students with 21,640. The Department of Mental Health, with seven students, is the smallest district. Of these districts, 83 had less than 1,000 students, 59 had less than 500

Source: Orlando Rodríguez, Associate Legislative Analyst, Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission



- Connecticut district schools are likely to experience continued declining enrollment due to demographic trends (in outer-ring suburbs and small, rural towns) and competition with school choice offerings (in cities and inner-ring suburbs). Declining enrollment creates fiscal challenges for towns and may threaten the economic competitiveness of the state if not creatively addressed. Districts with declining enrollment may have to cut staff, operate facilities below capacity or consider closing schools. More importantly, declining enrollment will become a strategic issue for the State if it compromises the ability of Connecticut to grow a talented workforce and to attract and retain employers in the future. Population projections should provide a basis for future enrollment projections, but those projections should also take into account the effect of market forces and state initiatives that may impact enrollment - such as school choice, economic development, housing and transportation.
- Declining enrollment can be addressed through the expanded use of existing programs to balance enrollment across districts. The Open Choice program (Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec.

### Change in Population Age 0-19 2010 to 2025



10-266aa) allows enrollment and transportation of students from selected urban districts (currently, Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven)<sup>5</sup> in neighborhood schools in nearby suburban districts, and vice versa. State grants to compensate the receiving districts increase as the percent of Open Choice students enrolled in the district increases. Evaluations of Open Choice, dating back to the 1960s, conclude that "the number of students in the program should be increased"<sup>6</sup> and "towns should offer the maximum number of seats available for Project Choice students, without waiting for state direction,"<sup>7</sup> although students from low-income

<sup>5</sup> CSDE, Open Choice Program Questions & Answers, at: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwrp/view.asp?a=2661&q=335142>

<sup>6</sup> Jacobs, Erin. "Educating Inner-City Children in Suburban Schools: A Randomized Study of Majority-to-Minority Transfer and Achievement in Connecticut". Senior Honors Thesis, Department of Sociology, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 2003. Available from the Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, Connecticut (<http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu>)

<sup>7</sup> Frankenberg, Erica. "Improving and Expanding Hartford's Project Choice Program." Poverty & Race Research Action Council, Washington, DC, 2007.

families face greater challenges and "should be provided with more counseling and other forms of support."<sup>8</sup> As of 2013, 2,635 students participated in Open Choice statewide, an increase of 50% from 2006<sup>9</sup>. Smaller suburban and rural districts have been among the most active at utilizing Open Choice – Bolton, Canton, East Granby and Plainville have the highest rates of Open Choice enrollment as of 2013-14 (between 5 – 6 % of total enrollment). Plainville has used state Open Choice funds to refurbish facilities and to purchase equipment "including a 3D printer, robots and a textile machine."<sup>10</sup>

- School capacity varies greatly across the state - some schools face closure due to dwindling enrollment while others are realizing overcrowded classrooms. The Department of Administrative Services collects data on school capacity, but it is not reported at the region or district-level. Proposals to consider school closures are reported within individual towns, but often do not circulate beyond those communities. Schools in close proximity are often managed by different entities (i.e. vocational technical and district schools). Better data on capacity and potential closures would aid state and regional entities in planning and help to identify opportunities for inter-municipal cooperation.
- The Connecticut Department of Education and the 202 School Districts are paper-dependent when it comes to record keeping. It is not uncommon for an entire school year to lapse when a student transfers from one school district to another for their records to catch up with them. Data, in a common and easily

"In spite of the face validity of school consolidation as a solution for educational problems, the research on school size indicates that the economic and curricular advantages of large schools are often exaggerated and that a variety of factors influence the relationship between school size and students' academic achievement. Thus, educational decision-makers need to develop reform plans based upon a balanced consideration of all the important factors related to school size."

Effects of School Size: A Review of the Literature with  
Recommendations John R. Slate  
University of Missouri, Kansas City - Craig H. Jones  
Arkansas State University

retrievable format, is essential for planning and decision-making.

- The manner in which the State reimburses for school construction grants is broken. Currently, it is based on a eight-year maximum enrollment calculation. The process does not require a true examination of enrollment projections or consideration of available spaces in neighboring towns.

#### District Consolidation and Cost Efficiencies:

- Despite continued declining enrollment, there is little movement toward consolidation of school districts. Towns hold strong to a tradition of

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<sup>8</sup> Jacobs, Erin. "Educating Inner-City Children In Suburban Schools: A Randomized Study of Majority-to-Minority Transfer and Achievement in Connecticut". Senior Honors Thesis, Department of Sociology, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> CSDE data on Public School Enrollment PK-12 by Resident Town, at: [http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct\\_report/EnrollmentDTViewer.aspx](http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct_report/EnrollmentDTViewer.aspx)

<sup>10</sup> <http://ctmlr.org/2015/11/03/school-desegregation-will-focus-shift-from-magnets-to-suburbs/>

home rule and consider schools to be part-and-parcel to their communities. The potential for improved efficiencies in administration and increased educational opportunities offered through consolidation or regionalization have not caught on in Connecticut. Changing this reality is no easy task; however, the continued decline in enrollment may make such change occur as a matter of necessity.

- Voluntary consolidation has had limited uptake in Connecticut, and would most likely continue to occur in only small, rural districts. There are 18 regional school districts with an average enrollment of 1,500 students, covering 47 towns with an average population of 5,800 per town. Further consolidation in small, rural districts would yield limited cost savings as these districts cover only 5 percent of students. Additionally, regional agreements can be costly to enter and difficult to exit.
- Recent legislation from Vermont and Maine to encourage district mergers has had limited success. Vermont's initiative "is not likely to achieve the results intended by the legislature...only a small number of merger proposals came before voters in the first three years, and only two were approved."<sup>11</sup> An evaluation from Maine found consolidation below targets and several "reluctant" districts seeking exit from regional partnerships."<sup>12</sup> In both cases, there was mixed feedback whether mandates were necessary or whether voluntary consolidation and incentives would suffice. A review of the Maine law concluded:

*Overall, the ability of communities and school districts to identify mutual interests with other*

**"Because most school districts assign children to schools by neighborhood, racial, ethnic and economic housing segregation contributes to severe disparities in educational outcomes in Connecticut."**

CT Dept. of Housing,  
Analysis of Impediments to  
Fair Housing Choice 2015

*district partners was the most critical factor determining whether districts could successfully partner or not. Leadership from superintendents and other planning members was another significant factor that propelled communities to approve or reject reorganization. Positive and collaborative relationships between some districts facilitated efforts to consolidate.*

*With respect to policy, the overwhelming consensus was that the approach of a mandate with penalties, short timeframe, and poor articulation all produced a negative reaction against the policy and led to efforts to repeal or revise the law. The recurring efforts to change the law, together with a general lack of confidence in the state's education leadership, produced a high level of uncertainty about the fate of the policy, reduced motivation to engage in reorganization work, and stalled work in a majority of cases<sup>13</sup>. (emphasis added)*

- Current law makes it very difficult to dissolve a regional system that no longer provides the needed curriculum diversity or opportunity and the services that are provided are at a disproportionately high cost to towns. Region 11 (covering grades 7-12), serving Chaplin,

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<sup>11</sup> Rogers, J.D., Giesner, T.J., & Meyers, H.W. (2014). Early experiences implementing voluntary school district mergers In Vermont. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 29(7).

<sup>12</sup> C, Fairman Janet, and Christine Donis-Keller. "School District Reorganization in Maine: Lessons Learned for Policy and Process." *Maine Policy Review* 21.2 (2012); 24-40, [digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol21/iss2](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol21/iss2)

<sup>13</sup> School District Reorganization in Maine: Lessons Learned for Policy and Process Janet C. Fairman University of Maine, [janet.fairman@maine.edu](mailto:janet.fairman@maine.edu) Christine Donis-Keller, page 37

Hampton and Scotland, now has a total school population below 350 and a per pupil cost over \$26,000. Current law provides that the dissolution of the region requires a unanimous vote of each participating town - rather than a majority of the towns or residents.

#### Impact of District and School Size and configuration on vulnerable Students

- Regionalization of schools, and the softening of local control, has had long-term support from advocates for school de-segregation. In *Sheff v. O'Neill*, the State Supreme Court held that "the state's school districting statute was the 'single most important factor' contributing to the current de facto school segregation," in violation of the state Constitution. As recently as 2013, advocates for the *Sheff* case stated that fragmentation is the "the elephant in the room" and "the ultimate answer to *Sheff* is [the] regionalization" of school districts. Regionalization has the potential to assist in achieving the goals of the *Sheff* case. Regionalization (as well as consolidation of neighboring school districts) - however justified by the economics and educational value - is hindered by communities' lack of commitment to desegregation.
- "Findings on the impact of school size on service quality are diverse and seem to be heavily influenced by factors that are idiosyncratic to individual localities."<sup>15</sup> At-risk students are most likely to suffer with larger classrooms and schools, although very small schools can lead to fewer resources for students. Research indicates that "students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit significantly more from small elementary schools" and that "impoverished students...often benefit from smaller schools and districts,

### Connecticut does not have a *metric* that measures the efficiency or efficient use of public funds for *student transportation*

and...can suffer irreversible damage if consolidation occurs." Parent involvement may also suffer in larger school districts.

#### Transportation is a Major Cost to both the State and Towns

- According to a recent Office of Legislative Research Report<sup>15</sup>:

*State law requires school districts to provide transportation for all school-age children whenever it is "reasonable and desirable" (CGS § 10-220(a)). In general, this requirement is limited to transportation to public and certain nonprofit, private schools located within the school district. The only out-of-district transportation school districts must provide is for students attending state technical high schools and district designated regional agricultural science and technology centers. Within these requirements, local and regional boards of education retain discretion over district transportation policies, including the number of school buses, bus routes and stops, the students to whom they will provide transportation, and maximum walking distances. The SDE has issued guidelines for district policies (School Accommodations Workshop Package, October 2008, pp. 28-31), but they are not mandatory. The state provides an annual grant to local school districts that reimburses them for part of the cost of providing public school transportation. Reimbursement percentages vary from zero to 60% depending on the relative wealth*

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Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, The Quest for Cost-Efficient Government in New England

<sup>15</sup> Office of Legislative Research Report 2012-R-0085, By: Judith Lohman, Assistant Director, February 6, 2012 "School Transportation Requirements and Funding"

*of the town or towns making up the district. The state also provides additional funds for school districts, regional education service centers, and other entities that provide transportation for students attending certain schools outside their home districts."*

- Based on figures compiled by the Connecticut School Transportation Association, "public school transportation cost \$362,082,815"<sup>16</sup> (2006-07 school year). The total number of public school students transported was 456,652. Local schools transported 418,513 students, 17,450 special needs students, 4,111 In-town Vo-Tech students, 6,705 out-of-town vo-tech and vocational agricultural students, 6,621 out-of-town magnet school students, 3,140 out-of-town public high school students and 112 out-of-town charter students. Total public expenditures for private school transportation was \$21,177,896 (2006-07 school year). Total number of private school students transported was 21,166.<sup>17</sup>
- Based on figures compiled by the Connecticut School Transportation Association, the "percentage of total student population receiving public transportation is 80%. Average per pupil cost for public school transportation \$792.91. Per pupil cost for local schools \$482.82. Per pupil cost for special ed students on special vehicles \$6,546.49. Average per pupil reimbursement for private school transportation \$188.74."<sup>18</sup>
- The FY 2015 State Budget includes two statutory grants<sup>19</sup> to municipalities specifically for school transportation totaling \$28,480,248:

## RESCs and COGs are the *building blocks* for regionalism in Connecticut

Public School Transportation Grant - \$24,884,748, Non-Public School Transportation Grant - \$3,595,500. In addition, \$62 million was granted to school districts and RESCS for Magnet School and Open Choice.

- The monies provided to municipalities for student transportation come with no incentives or conditions for cost efficiencies. A recent report from Oregon concluded that transportation "expenditures could be reduced by an estimated 9 percent if inefficient districts adopted the practices of the most cost-efficient districts."<sup>20</sup> If this were the case in Connecticut, the resulting annual savings would be \$2,563,222 to the State. Based on the ED001 data, school districts spent \$451,735,621 on school transportation in FY14 (this includes the reimbursements that they received from the state, but does not include funds provided to

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<sup>16</sup> Connecticut School Transportation Association, <http://ctschoolbus.com/index.php>

<sup>17</sup> IBID

<sup>18</sup> IBID

<sup>19</sup> State Of Connecticut, Fy 2015, Fy 2016 And Fy 2017 - Estimates Of State Formula Aid To Municipalities

<sup>20</sup> Oregon Public School Transportation Funding: An Evaluation of Alternative Methods Prepared for The Oregon Department of Education January 2009

RESCs for Open Choice and magnet transportation.) Based on the 9% savings, the savings would be \$40,656,205 - \$2.56m to the state, the rest to the districts. Of the \$451.7m, \$162.8m is special education transportation.

- Connecticut does not have any metric that measures the use of public funds for student transportation. This lack of information severely limits the state's ability to create incentives for efficiency. The State of Washington, as one example, has developed an Efficiency Rating System (ERS) for school district efficiency.

*ERS employs a methodology known as the Target Cost approach, which produces estimates of the best possible performance of each school district relative to peer school districts, while taking into account as many school district site characteristics as possible.*

*The objective of the ERS is to identify, for each school district, an empirically based and mathematically sound minimum expenditure level and minimum number of buses that allows the school district to transport its students to and from school, while recognizing local site characteristics that influence cost, but are beyond the direct control of school district management.*

*The intent is to be able to identify school districts that, while receiving full funding under the STARS, have room for improving efficiency. It is also useful to employ this tool as a mechanism to identify what the costs should be for a school district that consistently expends more than the formula provides. In this sense, it provides a "target" of what such a school district should aim for in attempting to operate more economically.<sup>21</sup> (emphasis added)*

### **Improving District-District and District-Town Cooperation**

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<sup>21</sup> A Description of the Student Transportation Allocation Reporting System Efficiency Rating Process, State of Washington, <http://www.k12.wa.us/transportation/STARS/EfficiencyRatings/efficiencysystemdescription.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Connecticut Association of School Business Officials: Shared services White-paper, 2015 - page 3.

...more intentional efforts to share the burdens of administration regionally could lead to increased regional consistency in functions, allowing for opportunities for shared resources and information to be identified and pursued...

Citizens' Efficiency Commission Recommendation:  
Shared Administrative Functions and Automated  
Human Resource and Financial Management

- District-to-district cooperation covers a range of needs and has produced positive results.

According to information provided by the Connecticut Association of School Business Officials (CASBO) "94% of responding districts participate in some type of shared services or purchasing with another district, RESC or town. Over 92% participate in at least 3 areas and 76% participate in 5 or more areas of shared services or purchasing."<sup>22</sup> According to the CASBO White Paper, school district shared services cover, but are not limited to the following areas:

- Cooperative Purchasing & Consortia
- Human Resources/Negotiations
- Cafeteria Services & Director
- Transportation Services
- Insurances and Employee Benefits
- Maintenance & Operations
- Computer Hardware & Software
- Finance Office Operations
- Safety & Security Operations

- While there are examples of school districts and town governments sharing services (for example, Mansfield, Madison, Plainville and Brooklyn each share financial services with their respective school districts) - the practice is limited. There are few regional or multi-town (five or more) examples of cooperation. The reasons for the limited use of the sharing of services appears to be grounded in the strong sense of the separation of roles or "turf" (town government and board of education) and by home rule.
- The six RESCs are well established as regional providers and facilitators of services to their member districts. The expertise developed by the RESCs could be applied to non-educational service sharing expansion areas, such as:
  - *Cooperative bid expansion*
  - *Facilities management*
  - *Food services*
  - *Transportation*
  - *School safety and security*
  - *Technology*
  - *Health and wellness*
  - *Central purchasing*
  - *Electronic document management*
  - *Sharing non-educational services between towns and school boards.*
- For the rural areas (especially the northwest and northeast) of the state, with small districts, there must be an alternative to the current system for superintendent administration.

### Fostering Regionalism

- The Intergovernmental Policy Division of the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) is the functional facilitator for regionalism in Connecticut. Expanding their role to cover what

education and municipalities may do collectively and together to enhance the goals of regionalism.

- RESCs and COGs are the building blocks for regionalism in Connecticut. The RESCs and the COGs share a unique position as regional facilitators for establishing the framework for cooperation, providing support, monitoring, evaluating, and disseminating best practices that can be replicated in other RESC/COG regions. They offer an established model for regional collaboration and innovation. RESC/COG partnerships should be leveraged to promote and support regional collaboration for both school districts and municipalities. The State can strengthen existing regional infrastructure/capacity, using RESCs and COGs, to support regional initiatives and collaboration to take advantage of the existing regional infrastructure and expertise that the RESCs and COGs can provide. The Intergovernmental Policy Division of OPM can build on their relationship with the COGs to include RESCs to:

- *Partner with RESCs to carry out data collection and analysis, planning and development, implementation support, monitoring, and evaluation functions related to regional cooperation to assist in identifying and implementing regional opportunities.*
- *Advocate for state funding that encourages and supports public policy areas identified as priority regional cooperative efforts. An example of this is sustained funding for CEN and Nutmeg Network, which would place all towns and boards of education on the same network and lay groundwork for significant further cooperation and savings, particularly through shared back office and educational software purchases and management.*
- *Approve RESC and COG bid processes that meet state bid requirements, and clarify implementation through legislation/statute, to allow school districts to purchase products and services at the lowest possible cost.*

- Collaborate with RESCs to collect data and to document existing regional efforts. Make such efforts publicly available through a common website.
  - Identify services that are more efficiently operated through RESCs, such as ELL programs and professional development.
- Each town, region and the State is required to periodically produce a plan of conservation and development (POCD). A POCD is a blueprint for the future - including capital investments. Currently, statutes that direct local, regional and the state plans specify a range of subjects to be considered. However, there is no explicit direction to include education in long-range planning. Given the importance of education generally and the significant resources invested locally and statewide - it seems logical that we engage in long-term planning integrated into the other elements important to our state, regions and towns.
- Cooperative purchasing programs administered by CT RESCs and COGs have proven to save money through economies of scale, as well as save municipalities and school districts the resources invested in going out to bid themselves. Many purchasing agents believe that the only alternative to going out to bid for goods and services when
- required by their local purchasing policy is to use the State bid list. Existing statute does not refer to cooperative purchasing programs, and interpretations vary.
- Many smaller towns lack the administrative capacity to adequately cover their existing financial, human services and IT needs. By partnering town administrative functions with their corresponding school district administration or by regionalizing such services through a RESC or COG, towns and school districts could realize efficiencies and cost savings. A recent study by the Citizens' Efficiency Commission in Illinois, in part concluded that:
- "Shared administration and improved "back office" management could assist in eliminating the opportunity costs associated with these concerns, because administrative personnel would be more likely to be retained across administrations and build institutional knowledge needed for strong local government operations. Finally, more intentional efforts to share the burdens of administration regionally could lead to increased regional consistency in functions, allowing for opportunities for shared resources and information to be identified and pursued.<sup>23</sup>" (emphasis added)*

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<sup>23</sup> Citizens' Efficiency Commission Recommendation: Shared Administrative Functions and Automated Human Resource and Financial Management, page 4

## Recommendations:

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### 1. Improve data collection, quality and dissemination

- a. Modify Section 10-10a of the General Statutes to require that:
  - ▶ The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) facilitate the continual development and dissemination of state, regional and district-level enrollment projections. To accomplish this responsibility, the CSDE should partner with and fund an agency with the capacity and expertise to carry out this work effectively, such as the Connecticut State Data Center at the University of Connecticut.
  - ▶ The CSDE report on school capacity and proposals raised in districts for school closures at a state, regional (COG and RESC) and district-level on an annual basis.
  - ▶ The CSDE publicly report on school choice lottery applications and placements, for both magnet and Open Choice, by town of residence.
- b. Two pilot projects, funded through the RPI Program, that have the ability to be readily replicated in other comparable state regions - one through a COG and the other through a RESC to:
  - ▶ Develop and disseminate annual, actual and projected regional district level projections, and
  - ▶ Develop a system to analyze the region's school facilities and advise on opportunities for regional and/or inter-municipal cooperation.

### 2. Education should be embraced as a fundamental element of regionalism in Connecticut

- a. Modify existing statutes (Sections 16a-27, 8-35a and 8-23) related to the preparation of the State, Regional and Municipal Plans of Conservation and Development to include an element addressing education from the perspective of examining regional efficiencies and educational opportunities.
- b. The Intergovernmental Policy Division at the Office of Policy and Management should should expand to serve as a liaison and information source for regional collaboration, including education. The recommendations below outline ways in which educators, RESCs and CSDE can actively participate in state, regional and local planning.
  - ▶ The six RESCs directors and nine regional COG directors should be convened as a standing committee to the Intergovernmental Policy Division or as an advisory body to the Connecticut Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) to develop regional opportunities for municipal efficiencies that can be delivered through their existing regional structures. The agenda for this meeting should address:
    - Expertise, Capacity and Best practices of the RESCs and COGs that can be applied to either state or municipal delivery of services.
    - Barriers to regionalism
    - Capturing Economies of Scale
    - Increasing the positive externalities while reducing the negative externalities of regionalism

Partnering of the RESCs and COGs

- ▶ Amend Section 4-124s of the General Statutes to include RESCs as eligible regional organizations for the Regional Performance Incentive Program to further promote the application of regionalism in Connecticut.
- c. Clarify state statutes to enable town and school districts to access cooperative purchasing programs offered by governmental entities such as COGs and RESCs. Amend Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec. 7-148v. to include the following language: "Any municipality may purchase equipment, supplies, materials and services from a person who has a contract to sell such property or services to other state governments, political subdivisions of this state, nonprofit organizations or public purchasing consortia available through a RESC or COG, in accordance with the terms and conditions of such contract."
- d. The State should enhance existing programs that would alleviate declining enrollment issues, such as the Open Choice program (Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec. 10-266aa), which would both increase enrollment in and further the State's efforts to reduce racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic isolation in public schools.
- e. Support the Legislature's Program Review and Investigations Committee recommendations in the December 2015 report on "Regional Cooperation Between Local Boards of Education." Specifically, the "Legislature should consider either establishing a new grant or loan program to provide (seed) money for start-up costs for new cooperative efforts among local boards of education or resume funding of the Technical Assistance for Regional Cooperation grants (C.G.S. Sec. 10-262t) to support plans that implement cost-saving strategies."

3. Incentivize local school districts to embrace regional options and opportunities

- a. Both formula-based and competitively awarded education funding from the State should include incentives for regional efforts and/or inter-district/town initiatives being undertaken by towns and school districts.
- b. The State should, initially as a pilot program through one of the RESCs, fund a common student management platform for use in all public schools and districts to maximize use of education data while reducing costs.
- c. The State should adopt the use of student enrollment as a determinant factor:
  - ▶ When deciding to provide funding for school construction projects. Additionally, the CDE and DAS should be required to make an analysis of neighboring communities when a construction grant request is made to determine if there are potential partnerships or economies of scale that can be gained. Amend Section 10-286 to require that the "number representing the highest projected enrollment" occur "during the last four years of an eight year period" rather than at any point "during the eight year period," as is currently required.
  - ▶ To enable smaller districts or combinations of districts to opt for alternative superintendent services and enable RESCs to provide such administrative services.
  - ▶ Enable regional school districts that have diminished enrollments resulting in decreased opportunities for students and disproportionately high per pupil expenditures to initiate a comprehensive study regarding options to dissolve or reconstitute (add or delete grades to a regional system) their regional arrangement by a majority vote of the districts/towns involved; the

current law requires a unanimous vote of each town. The further intent is to allow either a majority of the participating towns' legislative bodies or boards of education, to initiate this process.

4. **Require that the use of public funds for education transportation are based on a measurable system predicated on efficiency**
  - a. Provide funding (\$250,000) to the Connecticut Transportation Institute at the University of Connecticut, in consultation with CSDE and the Intergovernmental Policy Division of OPM, through the Regional Performance Incentive Program (4-124s) to develop an Efficiency Rating System for the distribution of public transportation funds.
  - b. Recommendations made for the Efficiency Rating System shall be forwarded to the Education Committee for possible legislative action.
  - c. Pilot the system developed by UCONN on a regional, urban, suburban and rural basis.