

TESTIMONY OF DR. ELLIOTT LANDON
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS, WESTPORT, CT

Re:

HB 5556: An Act Concerning the Regional Uniform School Calendar

Dear Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher,
Representative Lavielle, and Members of the Committee:

I am here today to speak against this latest legislative proposal which would have the effect of imposing severe financial penalties upon those school districts that do not abide by the unfunded mandate regarding a Regional Uniform School Calendar. However, I am also here to urge the members of this Committee to do your best to undo in its entirety the unfunded mandate of a Regional Uniform School Calendar. After all, this unfunded mandate was introduced into a Planning and Development Committee bill as a House floor amendment ***without it ever being discussed or commented upon at a public hearing.***

The ability of every school district to create its own calendar for its students and teachers had long been a practice in Connecticut before the mandated Regional Uniform School Calendar became a reality. Consistent with the New England tradition of supporting local control, the state legislature for decades has not interfered with this particular local option for school districts. With this unfortunate unfunded mandate, the Legislature has expressed its disdain for allowing any school district in every community to create a calendar based upon its own very special local culture, local traditions, and local needs. In Westport, for example, the loss of a full week of recess during the month of February has had a catastrophic effect upon families who value the relationships of their

children with grandparents, uncles and aunts, and other relatives who do not reside in close proximity to them. Both the December recess and the Spring Recess, which oftentimes include Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter and Passover, mostly provide for a family time of celebration at home, celebrating the religious traditions with their children and friends and relatives living in close proximity. A recess in February, traditionally, has permitted Westport parents and children to visit with grandparents and relatives throughout the continental United States and beyond, as they would otherwise be unable to do so at other times within the school year. For some families, the problem is exacerbated because their children participate in athletic activities that preclude them from leaving their school districts because of the spring sports schedule. Thus, the February recess has been a very important part of the lives of most of our parents who wish to retain strong ties between their children and the grandparents and other relatives of those children.

Moreover, as a superintendent of schools for 39 years, I fear the following:

First, with a partial February recess, many parents who wish their children to be with grandparents and other relatives at this one time during the school year, the tendency has been to utilize additional days for grandparent visitation during the week before the partial break and the week following. That means a tentative loss of at least three weeks of vitally needed full instruction in Westport and many other school districts.

Second, I know from firsthand experience that the February recess enables the rash of extended illnesses to be broken as school children are removed from crowded school environments where viruses, colds and other illnesses are shared. Additionally, when schools have been closed during the February recess for an extended 9 day period, the savings of fuel during the coldest month of the year have been substantially reduced.

The Regional Uniform School Calendar was originally intended to save on transportation costs through regional cooperation and by reducing the cost of professional development. That proved to be unrealistic, purely wishful thinking, indeed. The vast distances and long travel times between school systems across the state have resulted in generating few, if any transportation savings. In Westport, for example, and all the school districts in Fairfield County, I would venture to say that not a dime has been saved in transportation costs because of the unfunded mandate that all school systems abide by a regional and uniform school calendar. As to professional development, a full fiscal analysis should demonstrate that regional professional development has proven to be a total failure with barely a penny saved by local school districts as a direct result of the implementation of the regional uniform school calendar. I can share with you unequivocally, that in Westport, for example, the Regional Uniform School Calendar has resulted in not a single reduction in costs for the transportation of students both in and out of our school district, nor have we saved any money at all in the area of professional development.

I would urge this Committee to take forceful action and to recommend to the entire Legislature that the valuable time of our elected representatives be focused instead on far more relevant issues than financially penalizing any school district that refuses to adapt such a calendar, an issue that is most irrelevant when compared to other really pressing issues. For example, our elected representatives would be performing a much more vital service by focusing on such issues as closing the achievement gap between rich students and students of poverty; ensuring that every student graduates from Connecticut high schools with all the skills necessary to be successful in the complex world they will be inheriting; to fund all school systems appropriately; to fully address the full implementation of the State's obligation for Educational Cost Sharing; to fix a bilingual education program that limits the ability of the educational community to better address the needs of English language learners throughout the state; and, finally, to place the burden of proof in special education cases where it properly belongs.

Nonetheless, if the Legislature continues to support this unnecessary unfunded mandate, I urge the Legislature to exempt from punishment or financial penalty, any school district that follows a traditional three full week recess calendar in any school year.

March 7, 2016