

Testimony

in Opposition to

H.B. No. 5556: An Act Concerning the Regional Uniform School Calendar

Submitted by:

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March 7, 2016

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle and members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to join you this afternoon and share my concerns with regard to H.B. 5556, An Act Concerning the Regional Uniform School Calendar.

If I may, I would like to address provisions of H.B. 5556 as well as concerns we in Wilton have about the very premise of a regional calendar. You will recall that the regional calendar concept was never subject to a public hearing, so I would like to share our experiences in trying to adapt to the mandate.

I would like to state at the outset, that I do acknowledge and affirm the legislature's desire to promote cost efficiencies across school districts. Indeed, not a day goes by that I don't find myself engaged in every superintendent's least favorite exercise of trying to stretch a dollar farther, and trying to bring new classroom and teaching concepts to life without incurring added expenses.

But as much as I understand what the legislature was trying to accomplish, I would like to explain why this mandated approach is an unworkable solution for the Wilton Public Schools, and why I respectfully ask that you not only oppose H.B. 5556 – which would fine us for being in non-compliance – but also reject outright the entire concept of the mandated calendar.

First, the mandated calendar denies us the flexibility to craft a schedule that addresses our district's unique circumstances. Right now, the town of Wilton is

in the beginning stages of a comprehensive renovation of our Miller-Driscoll elementary school, which is our sole Pre-K through 2nd grade school. Work began in earnest last fall and is expected to continue through late 2017.

Plans have been carefully developed to minimize disruption to the learning environment, but nevertheless, the renovation is taking place while school is in session.

Because Miller-Driscoll is an old building – it was originally constructed in the early-mid 1960's – there is a significant amount of hazardous material abatement work that must be performed, in addition to tearing down of walls and site preparation.

As such, we planned all significant preparatory work to take place over summer vacations and school breaks. As part of this plan we temporarily shifted our start date to the Tuesday after Labor Day in both 2016 and 2017. Because the regional calendar stipulates a start date on or around the Wednesday prior to Labor Day, we had to invoke our flex days to accommodate the building project schedule. But using flex days in this way takes away any opportunity to customize our schedule elsewhere in the year.

I raise the Miller-Driscoll example because I think it highlights the shortsightedness of the regional calendar concept. Quite frankly, we ought to be able to start school on the day that best meets the needs of our community, without having to meet an arbitrary date set by individuals with no knowledge of our district.

Professional development is another critical consideration. Providing our teachers and staff with opportunities to learn from “best in class” innovators is critical to 21st century education. How and what we teach, and how we interact with students is constantly changing. Unless we keep current – and learn from the masters – we do our students a disservice.

Not surprisingly, many of our districts want to enlist the same experts and presenters. But if every district conducts professional development on the same day, there is obviously no way every district can book a preferred speaker. Speakers simply cannot be in ten places at the same time. The concept that districts can run joint professional learning opportunities may be workable in some cases, but certainly not in all. By allowing us to continue to set our own calendars, professional learning dates can be customized to the district and its needs. Professional development is everything when it comes to training our 21st century educators. But rather than promote continued training and learning, the regional calendar stymies it.

Finally, I should note that **Wilton is poised to receive no benefits from the regional calendar.** While I understand other districts may achieve transportation efficiencies and other synergies, Wilton will not. Our semi-rural district, with rare

exceptions (like the infrequent opportunities we take to ride share with other local districts when transporting students out of district), does not share services with neighboring districts, nor have we yet discovered a way to do so.

At the end of the day, schools are about the communities they serve, and we ought to be able to address the priorities and needs of our students and their families. While perhaps well meaning, the mandated regional calendar blocks us from this objective, and has, with all due respect, become an onerous mandate. It is, quite frankly, a solution to a problem that does not exist.

We respectfully ask that you reject H.B. 5556, as well as the underlying concept of the regional school calendar.

Thank you for your time.