

To: The CT State Education Committee
Subject: PSB 874, PSB 738 and PSB 457

As a parent of public school children in CT, I strongly oppose PSB 738 and PSB 457 that would require regionalization of schools. I also oppose PSB 874 written in it's current form based on Section 2, Item b)16 which would "use incentives, grants or tax changes to accomplish any of the other preliminary recommendations".

My husband grew up in Wilton, CT. I grew up in a large town with a high school graduating class of almost 800 students. I determined I did not want that for my children so when my husband and I were looking on where to settle in either NY, NJ or CT we were looking for a smaller town. We chose to settle in Weston based on their strong schools, local beauty and strong sense of community. CT schools are one of it's greatest assets and a primary reason people come and stay in our state.

I like that I know my neighbors when I am in town, that I know people on our town Board of Ed and the kids know their principals and teachers. There is a social connectivity that would not exist in a larger school district. I want my children spending time with their teachers, not spending more time on a bus. It is our right to manage our town schools at our town meetings. We want our own representatives to help decide what works best for Weston. Changing our schools would be changing how we do everything in our towns!

Studies

None of the bills say anything about the purpose being to provide higher quality of education for our children. Nor do they emphasize cost savings - it appears to be about redistribution of funds and resources. After reading several published reports, all cite critical reasons that show regionalization causes more harm than good and benefits are vastly "over-estimated". There is no 'one size fits all' model - careful and extensive analysis and consideration must be reviewed on a case-by-case basis letting districts decide what is best for them. In fact, 43 districts in CT have already consolidated into 19 regions and others are are discussion.

A recent study published by Hartford Foundation for Public Giving gives a very comprehensive view of the *Pros, Cons and Surprises of Regionalization* while also citing experiences of neighboring states.

Studies show that smaller schools rather than larger ones allow for a better environment for LEARNING. Isn't that what we should be striving for? Helping our children be ready for the real world and to have a chance at independence and success (and less reliance on government programs long term)?

Cons:

- Significant 'start-up' costs to consolidate
- Increased transportation costs
- Increased student travel time equates to less learning time
- No proof of cost savings or improved performance, in fact many studies show increases to costs and decreases in educational achievement
- Overall increases (leveling up) in staff salaries due to seniority/contracts
- Reduced opportunities for students to participate in sports teams and other school activities
- Loss of local control to meet specific needs of the community
- Negative attitudes and resentment among staff members, parents and students

- Managing different priorities based on different student populations (i.e. merging different curriculums)

Instead of tearing the good schools DOWN what can we learn from how they operate to help bring the struggling schools UP? It is not all about money. Some large districts spend as much per student as smaller districts. There are large districts (enrollment greater than 15,000) with below average expenditures (e.g., Bridgeport and Waterbury) and districts with above average expenditures (i.e., Hartford, New Haven, and Stamford). *I find it interesting to see Hartford and New Haven with above average expenditures.* Similarly, small districts (enrollment less than 500) can have above average expenditures (i.e., Cornwall) or below average expenditures (i.e., Sprague). Without proper checks and balances sending more money to mismanaged districts will not solve the problems and our business-oriented Governor should know that.

Maybe the opposite approach should be considered (also cited in published studies) - breaking up large districts into smaller districts with joint administrative oversight!

Studies have shown that costs are not likely to increase with proper oversight but educational achievement improves. In addition, smaller schools gives students more opportunities to participate in sports, clubs and music. Those involved in extracurricular activities have a higher graduation rate - again a plus towards educational achievement and independence.

What have we learned from other regionalized states?

Did you know? Based on US News and World Report:

- In CT, 20 of the top 25 ranked schools in CT are public. Of those 20, 11 are in Fairfield County. Our #5 CT school is ranked 332 nationally and our #10 school is ranked 439 nationally.
- In VT, #1 ranked school is ranked #493 nationally. Their #10 school is ranked #2314 nationally.
- in NH, their #2 school is ranked #717 nationally and their #10 school is ranked 2010 nationally.
- In Maine, their #1 school is ranked #209 nationally and their #10 school is ranked #1999 nationally.
- In MA, where regionalization is still in discussion, their #1 school is ranked #48 nationally and their #10 school is ranked #303 nationally.

How does this show regionalization produces positive outcomes and educational achievement?

Money is Leaving our State

It has been disheartening and quite sad to hear well published reports of snickering and name-calling from some in Hartford over the noise in Fairfield County. These comments only display the ignorance that exists in Hartford and lack of understanding of the communities outside of their own districts. Do you really feel Stamford and Danbury have the same issues as Bethel and Darien? Fairfield County towns are not the only ones against what Hartford is proposing. Many towns in eastern and northern CT are not in support of the bills as currently written. Please take note.

While clearly some of those in Hartford have negative feelings for citizens of Fairfield County, the reality is that you need our tax revenue. Unfortunately, the approach you are putting forth will likely do the exact opposite. Did we not learn anything from the departure of GE? Citizens of Fairfield County have choices of other towns in Westchester and their proximity to NYC. We are already hearing from local realtors that people are pressing the pause button before buying a house here with these CT bills in play.

Current residents are considering leaving. How does that help the state of CT's fiscal crisis when there will be less money coming in?

While my children will likely not be affected by these potential changes, I worry about the future of children in ALL of our schools and the overall stability in this state. I am 100% behind improving lower performing schools but it should NOT be at the educational expense of the current high performing ones.

Sincerely,
Kristana Esslinger
Weston, CT