

Written Testimony for SB 738, SB 457, SB874

Date: Wednesday February 27, 2019

To: The governing body of the State of Connecticut

From: **Camille Falta**, Town of Wilton, Connecticut

Position: **Against the Forced Regionalization of Schools**

I am a proud resident of Wilton Connecticut. My husband and I moved our family to Wilton eighteen years ago, because we loved the charm of a small town rich with history and we wanted a community that still embraced the values of church, commitment to family and most of all, education. We wanted a school that wasn't too big, that had smaller class sizes that had programs which would elevate our kid's talents and intellect. We wanted a school which also would give them a chance to play team sports of all kinds, as they developed. For eighteen years we have loved our town, loved our schools, and sacrificed to pay high taxes, so our children could live in a town and a school community where they would not get lost in the crowd.

Why now, with so much unrest in our country at every level, do you politicians want to ruin what we have worked so hard for? This is our town, the town we count on, the town we love and state legislators are forcing opinions on us about how we run our school and you don't even live here, and you have not contributed to our schools success. You are taking away our democracy and our town freedoms because The State of Connecticut is a mess. After paying a lot of taxes to this great small town, it now it feels as though we are being punished, for being successful. The State of Connecticut itself has been a huge disappointment to say the least, for many other reasons. Why now do you want to force the regionalization of school districts? Why not find innovative ways to motivate communities to carry their own and build up their own districts? It is unjust and unfair to force regionalization.

The failure of this State cannot be turned around with regionalization of districts. You may raise up Norwalk schools a little, but Wilton will lose big in the end, folks will leave this town and even worse – less young families will move here as we did 18 years ago. Many other areas that have forced this process have not been successful. Do the research, it's out there. Please, DO NOT take steps that take successful schools & communities like Wilton down, rather find innovative ways to make poorly performing school districts better!! We hear that the state is trying to find ways to fill "budget gap." Why not aggressively find

ways to bring good business's to our state? Why not cut benefits & costs of public employees like most of the companies that employ the taxpayers in our state have done? Stop trying to take more and more from moderately successful folks who have moved to Connecticut to raise their families.

By way of background, I grew up in rural Utah and lost my dad at age 8 to a terrible accident. My stepfather was killed when I was 16. My husband grew up on a farm in Vermont. Neither of us had parents that went to college, or came from wealth. Neither of us was born into privilege. We grew up in small town environments where our parents could get involved with the town and schools and have a personal impact improving the community. We married, lived in rundown apartments for years, said no to vacations, entertainment, and pricy meals so that we could save and afford to buy a home in a community like Wilton. Our 2600 square foot home in Wilton pays \$13,000 annually in property taxes, which is many times higher than our friends pay in Vermont, Utah, and most every other town in Connecticut for the same-sized property. Sure our property value is larger, but so is our mortgage and so are many of the costs incurred to simply maintain the property. Our property value has increased maybe 20% in 18 years. Our parents had homes whose value doubled and tripled in similar periods – my point being that the current generation of families in Wilton have not benefited from property value growth like those of the 70's, 80's and 90's. Additionally, the Trump Administrations \$10,000 cap on the deductibility of SALT (State and Local Taxes) will likely make most home values in Wilton fall as folks actually see the impact on their tax returns. Residents in Southwestern Connecticut, where property values are higher than most other parts of the state – will be hit the hardest. The timing of the regionalization idea could not have been worse.

My husband and I are the "typical" residents of Wilton, and the surrounding towns. Yes, there are some Ultra-Wealthy folks and some very poor folks around – but 80% of the people are similar to my husband and I. We are far from wealthy. On paper, we do own an "expensive" home, but we also maintain a very high mortgage, during a time when many high paying jobs in the area have left and New York City financial jobs are paying much less (remember, GE is gone and UBS & RBS employ 1/5th of the people that they used too. Those were the 3 largest high paying employers 10-12 years ago). Your proposal to take school control away from our town will hurt most of the folks in our town (the 80%), who arguably: 1. are not wealthy, and 2. already pay much more to the state than what is returned to the town.

The population of Wilton is already declining and folks are leaving or discussing leaving already due to financial squeeze. The real estate market is terrible in our town, despite a very strong economy – so many folks fear what will happen in the next downturn. The Trump Tax hike is only just beginning to be realized and understood, and we know that it's impact will not be positive. Please, please, please do not add to the difficult situations of the 80% mainstream folks in Wilton who moved their families here, want to stay here, but who are struggling already. Please don't think that most of our residents have deep pockets

because the home values seem high – know that most people have equally high mortgages! I also know that this area (Fairfield County) has a reputation because of the pocket of folks in the area that are truly wealthy. My husband and I hate those people too! (just kidding). Of course, you must know that the wealthiest are the folks that can easily move if taxes go up and property values go down – they will not be badly hurt. The majority will be hurt. Many of us will leave, be it much, much more gradually and financially crushed, as the area continues to stagnate.

I urge you to **vote no to forced regionalization in any form**. I urge you to **kill any bill that has any form of forced regionalization on a Connecticut town. School regionalization should be voluntary** – something that a town decides to do based on the desires of their citizens. There is not many things that are more American than allowing the residents of each town to control their own schools. Solve Connecticut's fiscal problems some other way that will not significantly hurt our state.

Respectfully,

Camille Falta