

TOWN OF DURHAM

OFFICE OF THE FIRST SELECTMAN

LAURA L. FRANCIS



**Testimony
Town of Durham
Before the Education Committee
March 1, 2019**

Oppose SB-457 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in *opposition* to **SB-457, AN ACT CONCERNING THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS**, which mandates the consolidation of small school districts with fewer than 2,000 students.

The Town of Durham participates in a regional school district. Unfortunately, as structured, we have no authority to control increases in education spending. Lawmakers should address the problems that towns participating in regional school districts are currently facing in trying to control the size of education budgets.

Although legislation was adopted encouraging regional boards of education to have regional boards of finance, many boards of education are reluctant to do so. Region 13 did create a regional board of finance after pressure from the towns, but they have not encouraged constructive dialogue in efforts to control education costs. We believe this legislation should be strengthened to give boards of finance a seat at the table and require boards of education to utilize their expertise.

In addition, the Minimum Budget Requirement, which provides that towns must budget the same as they did in the previous year, with certain exceptions, makes it very difficult to reduce education budgets. Due to declining enrollment, Region 13 closed a school and faced considerable difficulties in reducing the budget to reflect the cost savings.

Our district does look for opportunities to share services with other communities and school districts, through purchasing consortiums, and other avenues. However, one-size-fits-all forced school consolidation does not make sense given the unique needs of different communities. A cost-benefit analysis must be undertaken that provides towns and school districts with information on areas that may produce savings and enrich education. Forced regionalization does not guarantee cost savings and may disrupt the delivery and quality of education for students.

Rather than mandate consolidation, lawmakers should explore options for improving efficiencies through technology, that will allow towns to share back office functions, and provide opportunities for students to study subjects that are not offered in the school district.

I can assure you that Durham and Middlefield and other towns in our region take every opportunity to partner when it makes sense. In fact, I currently have relationships for delivery of services with many towns in our region such as PSAP, transfer station, public water delivery, transportation, probate, planning and more. AND, compulsory statutory language was not needed.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Laura L. Francis