



**Testimony
Betsy Gara
Executive Director
Connecticut Council of Small Towns
Before the Education Committee
March 1, 2019**

The Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) strongly **opposes SB-457, AN ACT CONCERNING THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS**, which requires school districts serving less than 2000 students to consolidate with larger school districts.

Consolidation does not always produce cost savings. Several smaller school districts have explored consolidation options and concluded that consolidation would not result in significant cost savings. Instead, consolidation raised concerns regarding whether the quality of education would suffer.

There are many reasons why consolidating small school districts may not be in the best interest of students, taxpayers and the community. For example, many small school districts are located in rural areas where homes are spread out across a wide geographic area. For these students, forced consolidation may result in less time in the classroom and more time on the bus.

In addition, additional transportation costs, including costs associated with fuel, maintenance, bus driver wages, benefits and overtime, bus leasing and/or purchasing, insurance, garage and parking facilities, may wipe out any savings generated from consolidation.

In Connecticut's small towns, schools are often the heart of the community. Residents of all ages attend plays, concerts, and athletic events to come together as a community to support the students and each other.

Various studies on school consolidation conclude that top-down, forced consolidation simply does not work. Instead, we should work with towns and school districts to encourage them to pursue voluntary regional, shared services approaches that make sense for their community and for their students.

The proposal also fails to enable towns to reduce education costs by eliminating state mandates that drive up costs. For example, under the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) mandate, school districts must budget at least the same amount for education as they did in the prior fiscal year, with certain limited exceptions.

The MBR mandate is holding town budgets hostage, imposing a tremendous burden on property taxpayers to fund unnecessary levels of education spending. Towns need more flexibility to ensure that education budgets can be adjusted to reflect declining enrollment and other areas where savings can be achieved. Providing towns with meaningful relief from the MBR mandate will go a long way toward helping towns control the growth of local budgets to ease the burden on property taxpayers.

COST is an advocacy organization committed to giving small towns a strong voice in the legislative process.