

Written Testimony Provided By Mr. Steven J. Jackopsic, Union School Principal

SB 457 AN ACT CONCERNING THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

SB 738 AN ACT CONCERNING THE CREATION OF REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Union...Community, tradition and family are just three of the words that first come to mind when I think about the tiny little town of Union, the *tiniest* in the state. When you drive through the town, you are surrounded by picturesque New England, with sparkling ponds, winding streams, old field stone walls, and rolling tree-covered hills. You can almost feel and taste old town New England as the scenery engulfs you.

This area in northeast Connecticut, known as The Quiet Corner, need not be silent any more. The call for forced regionalization and minimum school district sizes are nothing more than political ploys in a time when the state cannot get a grip on finances. It is time for Hartford to take notice of the impressive things going on at Union School and so many of the other small districts that make up the forgotten northeast corner of the state. Union School may be small, but it is an efficient and effective school district that continues to evolve with the times.

I am now in my 8th year as principal at this little school on the hill and feel blessed to be part of this community. As principal of this small school, I have the pleasure of getting to know each and every student EXTREMELY well. These bonds are not only formed with students, but also their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. This unique little school is the definition of a personalized learning environment. There is something to be said about a place where everyone is on a first-name basis.

Union School serves students in grades PK-8 and is one of the few PK-8 schools in the state. Our students attend class within multi-grade settings and flexible groupings where students have an opportunity to be mentee and mentor. Students also take "Electives" based on skills and interests in grades 5-8 centered on topics such as 3-D design, student newsletter, online foreign language, personal finance and more. The real benefit to our small school is working alongside these kids over the years and watching their growth from PK up through 8th grade and then into high school.

All of our staff serve in numerous roles and provide instruction across multiple grade levels. Each teacher is assigned to at least two grade levels. At the primary level, our classes consist of grades PK/K, 1/2 and 3/4, but also cross over between grades for science, social studies and language arts activities. Once students start at the middle school level, classes become more individualized and flexible based on student needs and interests. Our four teachers at this level have specific subject focus areas to provide greater vertical alignment. Our .4 PE/Health teacher also serves as an ABA-trained 1:1 paraprofessional for two of our students with significant needs. This type of cross-training enables us to have a deeper capacity and flexibility for our changing student population needs. Our other 1:1 ABA-trained paraprofessional also provides specific math support, in addition to maintaining the school library. A second paraprofessional has significant classroom teaching experience and not only provides support for students with special needs, but also has been cross-trained to complete many office tasks including payroll, tax filing, milk order processing/reporting, etc. In addition, our nurse position is shared by two part-time staff. Their willingness and flexibility to serve in additional roles helps manage costs and is further proof of the benefit of cross-training. Just two of the additional roles that our nurses fill includes 1:1 behavioral support for one of our high needs students, as well as collaborative teaching and the

development of our health curriculum. Many of our staff also hold multiple certifications to allow for greater flexibility in providing services and supports.

Our teachers are not only responsible for the development and delivery of curriculum for multiple grades, but they also are chief fundraiser leaders for the 8th grade Washington D.C. trip. Students, teachers and parents routinely raise over \$7,500.00-\$9,000.00+ over a two year period for this trip. Additional roles of teachers include ESY teachers, class advisers, SRBI coordinators, curriculum writers, club leaders, TEAM mentors and high school transition supporters, all with only seven full-time teachers.

For specials, our students participate in art, PE, health and music. The art position is .3 FTE and consists of general art courses for each grade in addition to art electives. These electives are driven by student interests. Students in PK-8 participate in general music courses. Students in grades 5-8 are able to choose additional electives such as Choir, Band and Drama Club, all with a .25 FTE music position. Lastly, all students in grades PK-8 participate in PE and health courses. Our middle school students also participate in a weekly PE Life Skills course focusing on activities they can continue to participate in no matter their age.

Our head of maintenance is responsible for much of the building and grounds maintenance, but is also a valuable handyman who has installed security cameras for a fraction of the cost of hiring an outside company, in addition to other upgrades to our lighting, plumbing, heating and other areas. He and his wife have been mainstays as our guest DJ's for many of the dances over the years. His wife also completes the nightly cleaning on a part-time basis.

Our front office administrative assistant processes payroll, completes all orders, processes milk orders, conducts various state reports and more, all while serving as our receptionist as well. She also provides lunch duty coverage two days per week. In the summer time, the hours are reduced in order to keep costs to a minimum but provide the needed office work.

Our superintendent is part-time (~65 days/year), but provides full-time service and communication to our district. Throughout each week, we talk just about every day on district-related matters. This consistent communication helps form cohesiveness within the whole school system and keeps our strategic plan focus areas at the forefront.

The role of the principal at Union School is truly unique and one I am truly thankful to have held in this community for the past eight years. As an administrator here, I get to the work that **really** matters and that is building close relationships with our students, parents, staff, BOE, superintendent and community members. Responsibilities on a day-to-day basis include: SRBI interventionist, building management, curriculum developer, budget developer (done in collaboration w/ BOE Chair and Superintendent), state data reporter (TCS, SEDAC, EDS, ECO, Evaluations Timelines, etc.), 1:1 student behavioral/academic support, grant writer (IDEA, REAP, other grants), TEAM district facilitator, Section 504 and PK-12 Title IX coordinator, special education administrator (in consultation w/ EASTCONN trained staff), transportation coordinator, high school liaison/PPT chair, summer school director, instructional coach, psychologist, calls for closing/delaying/dismissing early, building/grounds maintenance (including snow removal and ground's enhancements), web master, fundraiser, PBIS leader, professional learning developer, school safety/security leader, SBAC district facilitator and much more!

In a larger district, these responsibilities are spread across several different people, but in Union it falls on only one, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Please don't view this as a complaint. Look at it as an opportunity to understand the role and responsibility of an administrator of a small school district. If this isn't an effective and efficient instructional leader, I don't know what is. Being engaged and involved in this many facets of a school system and working closely with kids is an administrator's dream.

To make all of this work in a fiscally responsible manner and create a positive learning environment, creativity is one of the main ingredients needed. This is where our Regional Education Service Center, EASTCONN, comes into play. We utilize them for services we need and are able to adjust and minimize budget expenses based on current student population needs. A look at the following services from EASTCONN includes:

- Related services (Speech, OT, PT, psychological)
- Consulting in various areas
- Instructional coaching
- Curriculum and professional development
- Transportation (flexible fleet depending on student needs)
- Back-office/MUNIS software system
- IT support
- Cooperative purchasing

Other Cost-Savings and Collaborative Measures

- UCONN, Yale (in progress), Woodstock Academy partnerships
- Complete special education and regular transportation (Woodstock Academy and Stafford Public Schools Inter-district arrangement for high school students and technical high school students)
- Member of CT Partnership health insurance plan
- Cross-training of staff
- Part-time superintendent/full-time collaboration and communication
- Part-time specialists (Art, PE, music)
- High school opportunities for our students include: Woodstock Academy, Stafford High School, Cheney Tech, Windham Tech, ACT Magnet School, Rockville Vo-ag program
- Town collaboration/shared services (Grounds/building maintenance)
 - Ice hockey rink
 - Snow clean-up
 - Recycling/garbage
 - Insurances
 - Fuel
- Green Initiatives
 - Recycling program (Student-led)
 - Solar project

Strategic Planning, A Collaborative Approach

Strategic planning is a collaborative effort and requires input from everyone. Through town forums and surveys and meetings, a strategic plan has been developed for the hopes and dreams of our students. Board of Education members, staff and Administration have had several collaborative meetings centered on this continued work through the years. Our strategic plan consists of four main

components, including: ownership/engagement, world focus/curriculum, teaming and communication. Each component consists of a team of teachers responsible for the implementation, monitoring and professional learning of each of the specific focus areas within the components. Current plans continue to center around providing individualized instruction for each student.

Final Thoughts

While the word, “Regionalization” gets tossed around in times of economic distress as the answer to saving money, the research suggests otherwise. In numerous research articles, references to smaller schools for their efficiencies, safe and positive learning environments and student achievement are prevalent. Here is just a sampling of some of the research out there from a report recently conducted by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving:

- ***There is no consensus for the most cost-effective district size.***
- ***In 1999, a report from the New Jersey Assembly Task Force on School District Regionalization concluded: “Sharing administrative services doesn’t necessarily cut costs, because as personnel begin to take on region-wide responsibilities, it often becomes necessary to hire more staff to support them.”***
- ***Even when regionalizing does reduce per-pupil expenditures in small rural districts, it is unlikely to significantly affect education costs statewide because rural areas have considerably fewer students compared to suburban and urban districts. For example, reducing per-pupil expenditures by \$1,000 in Connecticut’s three largest districts (Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven) would create a combined savings of about \$61.5 million. In contrast, a \$1,000 per-pupil reduction in the three smallest districts (Canaan, Union, and Cornwall) results in a combined savings of only \$350,000. In this scenario, the 129 lowest enrollment districts would each have to reduce expenditures to equal the combined savings from Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven.***
- ***A 2010 report by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University Bloomington states that “...about half of [student-achievement]research demonstrates no difference in achievement due to school size, while the rest suggests higher achievement rates in small schools.”³ In contrast, a separate 2009 review of 57 empirical studies conducted after 1990 reports: “The weight of evidence provided by these studies clearly favors small schools.”***
- ***There is near consensus that small elementary schools result in higher educational achievement, or at a minimum, do not negatively affect educational achievement. Reasons for better education outcomes in small elementary schools include (1) increased parental involvement, (2) higher attendance rates, (3) a positive attitude among teachers, and (4) that they are better at identifying children who are falling through the cracks.***
- ***A later follow-up study of rural school consolidation in New York State found that the improvements in educational achievement expected from consolidation were not always realized. Among their recommendations they suggest (1) rural districts should be allowed to find their own solutions, and (2) facilitating rural schools being schools of choice for urban students.***
- ***Deconsolidation-It is often assumed that K-12 regionalization will eliminate duplication in administrative costs and thereby reduce expenditures. However, this does not always happen. In some cases, reductions in K-12 costs might be obtained by deconsolidation – breaking up large districts. Estimates were done comparing the cost savings from regionalization versus deconsolidation in Michigan. Two hypothetical***

scenarios showed that consolidating small districts to 2,900 students might result in a cost savings of about \$31 million annually. In contrast, breaking apart districts larger than 2,900 might result in an annual cost savings of about \$363 million. Hypothetically in Michigan, deconsolidating large districts has the potential to generate 12 times the savings that might be obtained from consolidating (regionalizing) small districts. Furthermore, proponents of more school choice for parents should consider that deconsolidation inherently increases the number of schools, thereby increasing school choice. Florida, North Carolina, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin have considered school district deconsolidation to decrease K-12 education spending and improve education outcomes.

- ***Generalizations about regionalization oversimplify a complex topic. Most importantly, regionalization of school districts does not always lead to reductions in expenditures – neither short-term nor long-term. Furthermore, promoting regionalization from a perspective of being cost-effective must also consider that “...students and communities may be losing their voices and power through the application of a business practice [mergers] found to have a 50% failure rate.”***

In conclusion, I would hope that the CT Legislature would proceed in a very thoughtful process about our educational system and the “little” schools that should be studied and analyzed for the best practices and wonderful things going on to improve student outcomes. With the destruction of small schools, comes the destruction of our sense of community, our sense of local control and thus, begins the tearing apart of the fabric of New England, small towns and small schools. Whatever short term gains that may be had, if at all, should not be used for making decisions that are going to have devastating effects on kids, communities and the overall state of Connecticut in both the short and long term. Regionalization should be a choice. Our kids, our schools, our control.

Please feel free to contact me at any time to schedule a visit. We would love for the entire state to see how small schools operate effectively, efficiently and continue to evolve.

Steven J. Jackopsic
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