

RE: Opposition to HB 7319 and any similar bills including but not limited to related bills SB738, SB457, SB874, SB454 or any changes that would establish school districts as separate School Taxation Districts

To Whom it May Concern and the Members of the Planning and Development Committee and Education Committee:

As a parent of three little boys in Tokeneke Elementary School, I strongly oppose HB 7319 and any other bills that propose to strip our towns of the power to assess, levy and collect taxes, borrow money, and appropriate funds for the purpose of providing educational services to our towns. I strongly oppose this bill and any other that would take away our towns' ability to control the educational services that it provides to its residents. The reasons for my position are set forth below.

My husband and I moved to our town for the schools, and the quality of our school district is what keeps us here. The high quality and efficiency of our schools is the result of the checks and balances that our local government and parents provide. Our budget process has multiple steps and the Board of Education must obtain approval of its budget from the Board of Finance before it is approved. This means that the Board of Education must persuade the Board of Finance that there are compelling reasons for each and every expenditure. Further, parents have the opportunity to review and provide comments on the budgets at statutory meetings prior to approval of any budget by the Board of Finance so they have a voice and are engaged.

These checks and balances by our local government and parents is the key to the success of our educational programs. Taking that local control away and making our Board of Education a separate taxing entity reporting only to Hartford will have a detrimental impact on the quality and character of our schools. This bill will silence the voices of parents and reduce parents' influence and engagement. Given that Hartford has failed to properly manage the fiscal affairs of this state for decades, Hartford should focus on fixing dysfunction in the state instead of risking "breaking" what is working well and what has worked well historically.

CT was ranked as a state in worse financial condition than 48 other states by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University in Oct., 2018 (see <https://www.mercatus.org/statefiscalrankings>). The quality of the local schools is one of the major reasons that people and businesses move to and stay in CT. CT has many, many problems and Hartford should focus on fixing the areas that are not functioning in a manner that will not destroy the lifeblood of CT. Why does Hartford, which thus far has done a terrible job managing the fiscal affairs of CT, think that taking control of the funding of the local school systems will benefit the state?

The questions raised by this bill are many and include how will resources be allocated? How will decisions on spending reflect the wishes of the residents who elect officials? Who will determine tax rates? Who will manage these taxing districts, how will salaries and benefits be negotiated and who will pay these expenses? In school bonding, how will towns with higher credit ratings be compensated for the higher costs associated with another town's lower credit rating? How will one town's priorities be weighed against another town, and what will happen when they do not agree?

I understand your goal is to improve the education and outcomes in the urban school districts. It is a good goal, but destroying what works well is not the way to accomplish your objectives. You must consider the harm the changes that you propose will inflict on CT's educational system and CT's economy. Why not hire top educational consultants for the failing districts to determine how you can improve the quality of the education in those districts and the outcomes? Why not appoint a special educational commissioner to oversee those failing districts for the purpose of improving quality and outcomes and hold that person accountable for putting systems in place to accomplish those goals? Why not study what is working at the local level and adopt those systems that might help in the urban cities? I respectfully suggest that this is where resources should be deployed.

In conclusion, I am concerned that this bill or any similar bill, if enacted, will erode the quality of the education in our local schools and will negatively affect the CT economy. Specifically, this bill will deter new families from moving to CT towns and result in many existing families moving to states where there is local control over school districts and high quality educational programs. Once new families stop moving to CT and existing families leave en masse, new businesses will not be attracted to CT towns and existing businesses will leave, too. This will worsen the state's fiscal crisis and your legacy will have been to destroy the lifeblood of CT. This is not in the best interests of CT.

Please oppose HB 7319 and any other legislation that requires school districts to become separate and distinct taxation entities.

Thank you for your public service and for listening to the people.

Sincerely,

Michelle Lee  
Darien, CT