

Dear Education Committee Members:

As parents of students in the Wilton Public Schools, we strongly oppose **Senate Bill 738, SB 457, and SB 874**. Despite their differences, these bills all threaten state-mandated school regionalization, lack any proof that they will deliver any financial savings, and threaten to undermine the quality of public education in our state. They represent a misguided attempt by Hartford to offload decades of poor fiscal choices onto the backs of our children. We urge you to reject these short-sighted proposals in favor of a collaborative model that seeks to encourage school savings on a case-by-case basis. Such initiatives should be led by our elected town representatives and school boards, maintaining accountability and control where it belongs: in our local communities.

**SB 738:**

This proposal is vague and ill-conceived, proposing consolidation of school districts based on an arbitrary population number (40,000) and equally random geographic lines (probate districts – as if the same considerations that govern how we organize our legal system should apply to our schools). This bulldozer approach was presented with no supporting evidence, ignoring the unique characteristics of the 100+ public school districts that stand to be affected. Does it make sense to combine an underperforming school with one that is thriving just because they're geographic neighbors? Should elementary school kids spend hours on a bus daily commuting to a regional mega-school? What is the return on investment for the multimillions dollars it would take to create and maintain each one of these giants? Are the largest school districts in the state performing better academically (graduation rates, math and reading proficiency, college, AP courses, etc.) or running more efficiently than the smaller ones?

No one did the research to figure out these critical details. Instead, SB 728 was dropped on Connecticut families like a bomb, and it's had the predictably destructive effect. Even if the proposal was only meant to "start the conversation" as Senator Looney has suggested, its reckless roll-out has fueled nothing but panic, confusion and resentment. We urge you to scrap this ill-conceived bill without further debate.

**SB 457**

This proposal is even shorter than SB 738, equally vague and uses another arbitrary metric – a total school population of under 2000 students – to threaten forced consolidation. Again, there is no supporting evidence explaining how this would improve the quality of education or save taxpayer money. There is also no guarantee that this number won't creep up in committee, threatening even more districts. By picking on the smallest schools in Connecticut, SB 457 seeks to divide rather than unite. Our smallest schools are disproportionately located in rural areas of the state, and consolidation would add to student commute times while failing to factor in the unique characteristics of each district. If a school district with 1000 students is failing to meet academic benchmarks and costing a disproportionate amount of taxpayer money per student,

then that school should be targeted for reform. But the same standard should apply to a failing district with 20,000 students.

## **SB 874**

We oppose this bill on the grounds that it creates a commission empowered to force school district consolidation with few if any constraints. This will be yet another Hartford bureaucracy funded by taxpayer money. One more commission to drain our state coffers. One more power grab stripping autonomy from our communities. Why not invest that money directly in our local schools, incentivizing each district to promote efficiencies in ways that make sense for each community?

The argument for school consolidation rests on two false promises: fiscal efficiency and higher educational quality. These claims are fool's gold, lacking credible supporting evidence. As concluded by the National Education Policy Center, "while state-level consolidation proposals may serve a public relations purpose in times of crisis, they are unlikely to be a reliable way to obtain substantive fiscal or educational improvement." (Howley C, Johnson J, Petrie J, Consolidation of Schools and Districts: What the research says and what it means. National Education Policy Center, Ohio University, Feb 2011). This same study concluded that "in the largest jurisdictions, efficiencies have likely been exceeded... producing diseconomies of scale that reduce efficiency."

For those who claim that opposition to mandated school consolidation is "elitist" and being used to perpetuate economic disparities in the state, the same NEPC study concluded that "impoverished regions... often benefit from smaller schools and districts, and they can suffer irreversible damage if consolidation occurs."

In conclusion, we urge you to consider the NEPC task force's recommendations and oppose any statewide mandated school district consolidation for these main reasons:

1. Research shows that savings for taxpayers, fiscal efficiencies, and curricular improvements are unlikely, and in some cases, consolidation may worsen fiscal inefficiencies and degrade a school district's academic performance.
2. Statewide mandates for consolidation based on population numbers and minimum district sizes are arbitrary and often prove unworkable.
3. Opposition to these proposals will escalate if they gain support, leading to legal challenges that will further drain local and state economies while tarnishing Connecticut as dysfunctional and hostile to families of school-aged children.
4. If mandated school consolidation is passed, it will trigger a mass exodus of young families from our state, further degrading our tax base.

Our outstanding public schools are the economic engine that drives Connecticut. They are the reason so many of us tolerate a disproportionate state and municipal tax burden, high cost of living, and the threat of additional nuisance taxes. Positive changes in our schools are always

welcome, but they should be driven by our school boards and town representatives: leaders who are locally accountable and will make decisions in the best interest of the communities they serve.

We urge you to oppose SB 454, 738, and 874 and any other bill that would open the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut public schools. Work with our schools. Not against them.

Thank you for your consideration,

Graeme and Catherine Lipper

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