

**Written Testimony of
Lon Seidman
Chairman, Essex Board of Education and the Region 4 Supervision District**

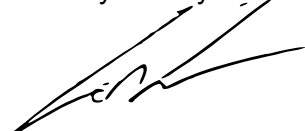
In regards to SB 874, HB 7150, SB 457, SB 738

To the members of the Education Committee:

Below is an op-ed I published at CTNewsjunkie.com that details the challenges Chester, Deep River, and Essex have faced trying to share educational services among our communities. We think a change to how Connecticut defines Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) could go a long way to encouraging the kind of regional cooperation policy makers are hoping to see.

I look forward to sharing our experiences in person at the public hearing.

Thank you for your consideration.



Lon Seidman

What Prevents Towns From Regionalizing Schools? Mountains of Red Tape from the State

Some say our proud Yankee mentality in the “land of steady habits” is to blame for our lack of regional school districts.

But a look at current education law suggests otherwise: local voters are more likely rejecting an overly rigid state regionalization law that requires small towns to cede all local fiscal and policy decisions to neighboring larger towns, with no way of ever getting out of the arrangement. And in some cases some towns could end up paying more while neighboring towns pay less. What voter would support that?

To date, 17 regional school districts exist including my home district of Region 4 that covers the towns of Chester, Deep River, and Essex. While Region 4 towns operate a single high school and middle school, we maintain separate elementary schools in each town for grades K-6.

Enrollment over the decades supports having the three schools. It never made sense to abandon perfectly good buildings and spend more to construct a larger regional space to accommodate students. This concept of a neighborhood elementary school is one shared by districts large and small throughout the state and one that we feel is important for our young people.

For 70 years, Region 4 towns have been doing everything right when it comes to finding efficiencies with this arrangement. This includes employing a single Superintendent and central office for grades K-12 along with consolidating many shared services between all of our schools. But it requires us to have five (yes five) school boards for the three towns with 33 members in order to comply with draconian state laws.

This is because the state won't allow our unique regional arrangement to be recognized as a school district. Instead we have to maintain separate boards for each elementary school plus a fourth for the regional schools. And if that's not enough, we have that fifth board that allows for cost sharing between all of these entities. More on that below.

Past attempts to form a single, state-sanctioned regional school district for K-12 have failed many times over the last several decades.

Voters did not want to cede decision-making authority over school closures to neighboring towns, nor did they want to shoulder the burden of subsidizing schools in the neighboring towns if one of those schools got too small. And of course there's the issue of giving up local financial control of education spending. Unlike local town education budgets that have the scrutiny and oversight of a Board of Finance, regional school district budgets are brought directly to voters without any oversight beyond the regional Board of Education.

But there are additional financial disincentives, too.

A big roadblock for us in Region 4 is the reliance on a single, state-mandated funding methodology: average daily membership, or ADM. The ADM is derived by taking the total school budget and dividing it by the number of students from each town.

ADM works when students attend the same school, but it doesn't work for towns that wish to maintain neighborhood schools. This is because fluctuations in per-pupil costs in each building have to be averaged across all three communities.

A recent analysis found that if Region 4 towns were to bring elementary schools into a single regional district, one town would see a budget increase of \$500,000 as a result of that averaging, quite the opposite of the cost savings voters expect from regional agreements.

And that's where school board #5 comes into play. We call that board the Supervision District and it operates under Connecticut's [cooperative agreement](https://www.cga.ct.gov/2017/pub/chap_166.htm#sec_10-158a) statute 10-158(a). The Supervision District membership is comprised of representatives from the other four boards of education.

The Supervision District is where we employ our superintendent of schools for the district and other central office employees. It also is how we share special education costs, teachers who work in more than one building, transportation, and many other common expenses.

Cooperative agreements under 10-158(a) do not have the same funding methodology restrictions of regional school districts. In our Supervision District some costs are shared using an ADM formula, but others are billed based on each town's usage. This allows member towns to decide what's appropriate for their students without impacting costs in neighboring communities or creating staff redundancies.

These shared services form the basis of the neighborhood school budgets that are approved by a local board of education, board of finance, and voters in each community. Most importantly it's a flexible agreement. We can change the terms of the agreement and any town can choose to leave if it's no longer working for them. If one town wants something the others don't have, they pay for it without burdening the partnering towns.

Despite this flexibility, the state doesn't see us as a single district. Even though we're managing everything through a single central office and operating like a regional school district, we're still forced to maintain five separate budgets, five sets of collective bargaining agreements, and endless paperwork to tediously "de-regionalize" every shared program for reporting back to the state to comply with mandates.

Innovative programs we've tried to develop to consolidate special education costs were shut down by state regulators who saw us as three separate elementary school districts. We were also denied an opportunity to convert our successful school-to-work manufacturing program into a magnet school that would have benefited the regional economy.

So how do we fix this?

A good start is to expand the definition of what a school district is. Give towns the authority to create flexible cooperative agreements under 10-158(a) and recognize such agreements as a school district. This keeps the local boards of education intact (although they could be made smaller), maintains local fiscal controls, and gives all towns in the partnership an equal voice as to the direction of their school district. If circumstances change, the partners will have the flexibility to adjust -- something they don't have the authority to do in a traditional regional school district as defined by the state.

Legislators need to recognize that red tape, unfunded mandates, and archaic laws are preventing us from achieving the kind of innovation and regionalism they want to see. Empowering local boards of education to design flexible regional governance models that are fair to the taxpayers they serve will go a long way toward bringing down the cost of education.

Senate Bill 572 offers an opportunity to move in this direction and something I hope legislators will take under consideration this session.

Lon Seidman is the chairman of the Essex Board of Education and the Region 4 Supervision District.