

To Governor, Senators, Committee Members and Whom it May Concern:

Re: Opposition to SB 738, SB 457 and SB 874

I am writing with regard to SB 738, SB 457 and SB 874 to state my vehement concern and opposition. As a Wilton, CT resident who recently moved to the area from Bucks County, PA I was undeniably concerned upon learning of Senator Looney's proposed Bill to regionalize school districts. As a parent of public school students, I strongly oppose SB 738, SB 457 and SB 874 and any other bill that opens the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut Public Schools. For so many families who relocate, the quality of the schools plays a critical role in determining where to settle. After extensive research and evaluating several towns in Connecticut and the broader tri-state area, my family and I settled in Wilton for several reasons, the quality of the schools being one of the leading drivers.

My primary concern is the fact that very little information, or misinformation, exists surrounding the aforementioned bills. I understand that a lengthy process exists for a bill to become law but, in the absence of information, it is human nature for people to draw their own conclusions, precisely what is happening surrounding these controversial bills. Senator Looney has stated his intent to start a dialogue, yet the dialogue feels very one-sided at the moment given the public has few details around the ultimate plan. So in an attempt to drive a bit more clarity to have a meaningful dialogue, I urge you, as an elected representative, to listen to some of my concerns and clear up many of the outstanding questions that I and many of my neighbors have. My questions are as follows:

- 1) *What exactly is the purpose of district regionalization?* If the purpose is "to create a more efficient educational system" I would like to better understand how that would come to fruition. Will it come through administrative shared services or are school closings/consolidations, staff layoffs and service cuts also in scope? Much of the research out there has conclusively stated that regionalization often does not drive cost savings, unless the school district has fewer than 2,000 students. Wilton, CT serves over 4,000 students within the district. The state economy is in disarray and I am a huge proponent of cost savings, but in order to remotely support this bill, I would need a much better understanding of how regionalization would, in fact, result in decreased costs given the research that states otherwise.
- 2) *If the purpose is not to create efficiencies and drive cost savings, what exactly is the purpose of regionalization?* Here is where the public has become irate because our legislators have been cryptic, vague at best, in providing sound rationale for the regionalization outside of cost savings. Again, stated intentions with clear evidentiary support will lead to a much better chance of gaining support for these bills.
- 3) *How exactly will new regional districts be determined?* This is perhaps the most important question and the one that has caused the greatest concern for my family and neighbors. Based on the limited information that has been conveyed, school district regionalization will be based on Probate Court Districts, meaning Wilton would merge with Norwalk. If true, this leads to several additional questions and concerns.

- a. As mentioned, Wilton serves 4,000 students while Norwalk, the 6th largest city in Connecticut, serves over 11,000 students. This consolidation would result in a new district nearly twice the size of many neighboring districts including Greenwich, Fairfield, and the combined Darien-New Canaan and Weston-Westport districts and will be larger than Danbury, the 7th largest city in Connecticut. I am concerned about the sheer size of a new district. We moved from the 3rd-largest school district in Pennsylvania and specifically chose Wilton because it was what we felt was the ideal size school district. I fear class sizes and student-teacher ratios will increase while per pupil spending will decrease. If the proposal based on Probate Courts is true, then I question why Norwalk may be part of the regionalization, while smaller districts including Greenwich, Fairfield and Danbury would not necessarily be forced to regionalize. The understanding is that municipalities under 40,000 people would be forced to regionalize. If that's the case, then I would need to better understand if Norwalk would be in scope.
- b. Most importantly, if Norwalk is in scope, I worry about school quality. As noted earlier, after extensive due diligence, I chose to relocate my family to Wilton based first and foremost on the quality of the schools. With forced regionalization, I question whether school quality will deteriorate. Wilton High School is a Gold-Medal school ranked **439** (top 2%) in the US according to US News and World Report. Wilton School District is ranked **#6** in Connecticut and is ranked **#134** in the nation according to Niche while Norwalk School District, on the other hand, is ranked **#4,593** in the US, a difference of 4,459 places. Rankings do not mean everything but they do mean enough when valuing the quality of the schools. I am concerned about such a large discrepancy between the rankings of the two school districts.
- c. Additionally, has thought been given to District Reference Groups? Districts are grouped together based on socio-economics, parent education level and amount of monetary support a district needs. Upon closer inspection, most districts would merge with another in the same District Reference Group (DRG) or merge with a district with a DRG 1 or 2 letters different. In the case of Wilton and Norwalk, Wilton resides in District Reference Group "A" while Norwalk resides in District Reference Group "F." There is a huge discrepancy between the characteristics of each group. For example, District Group "A" has an average enrollment of nearly 5,000 students while Group "F" has an average enrollment over 12,00 students, nearly 3 times that amount. District "A" has the lowest single-parent family % at just over 11% while District "F" hovers around 30%. District "A" has a Free Lunch Rate of just 3.5% while District "F" is close to 46%. Average median household income in District "A" is close to \$200,000 while District "F" is close to \$72,000. About 4% of students are non-English speaking in District "A" while 38% do not speak English in District "F." I am a proponent of creating greater diversity within schools but I fear that the disparity between the two districts is too great and potentially lead to greater challenges not being considered while potentially exacerbating "the haves and have nots."

Due to these differences, I worry about district test scores and overall rankings of the schools. Right or wrong, school district rankings played a vital role in attracting my family to Wilton and the state of Connecticut. They always play a large role in keeping young families in town who help to grow the economy. Any drastic changes in school rankings can always have the reverse desired effect whereby people move out of state, ultimately negatively affecting the state economy.

For the reasons stated above, I want to reiterate that I vehemently oppose these bills until further questions are answered. I am a registered Democrat and proudly voted for you with confidence that you will do the right thing for the state of Connecticut. Therefore, I implore you not to make me regret that decision or ultimately lose my vote in the future by opposing SB 738, SB 457, SB 874 and any other legislation that opens the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut Public Schools.

Sincerely,

Colin Smyth
Wilton, CT