

Testimony against Bills SB 457 and SB 738

Ross Tartell, PhD
116 Washiongton Post Drive
Wilton, CT 0687
917-544-4016

Co-Chairmen Senator McCory and Representative Sanchez, Distinguished Ranking members Senator Berthel and Representative McCarthy and distinguished members of the education committee.

I am here to testify in regard to:

- An Act Concerning the Creation of Regional School districts SB 738,
- An Act Concerning the Size of School Districts SB 457, and
- An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut SB 874.

These bills, especially SB 738 and SB 457 are not structured to improve educational outcomes. I am opposed to forced regionalization of school districts in any form, and so I cannot support these bills.

Here is my personal background. I have lived in Connecticut since 1984. I spent 18 years at Pfizer – one of my jobs was running instructional design for their 12,000-person US pharmaceutical sales force, and later did leadership development and communications for GE Capital. I have a Masters in Education, an MBA, and a Ph.D. in Psychology – my dissertation was on leadership from Columbia University. I have taught on the graduate level at Columbia since 1996. My areas of focus are on managing change, organization design and learning. I have chaired long range planning teams in the Wilton School District from the elementary school to district level from 1991 - 2013. Last Fall I ran as a Democrat for State Representative from the 125th District.

The state of Connecticut faces daunting problems. We have the second highest level of income inequality in the US. We have financial problems that cripple our capacity to deal with the social and economic issues facing our state, and we face an economic crisis where business and people are leaving and going to other states. The state spends approximately \$2 billion per year on ECS funding and there are questions regarding whether that significant level of funding is yielding a full benefit in regard to driving strong educational outcomes.

I recognize that forced regionalization is an attempt to address this crisis. The solutions outlined in these bills based on the literature, experience and best practice are doomed to be an expensive failure.

We know that educational success is driven by a few factors:

First, especially at the elementary school level, it is driven by creating an environment that is intimate and caring – what the academician Boyer called the “Basic school,” - a school unit size of about 500 people where everyone knows each other by name.

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1995/04/12/29carn.h14.html> As the size of schools increase, they reach a threshold where the ease of making the personal connection is lost. David Brooks, in a recent

New York Times editorial summed it up best, “Students Learn From People They Love.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/opinion/learning-emotion-education.html> Schools and school districts that are too big lose the intimacy that is so important to student success.

Second are the teachers and administration. We have all been touched by a teacher who did something that changed our lives. My 7th grade English teacher realized my difficulty writing and took the time to teach me to write a paragraph. My son talks about his most memorable learning experience as working with one of his teachers to organize a class trip in 11th grade. Administrators, teachers and students need a learning culture that is supportive, flexible and personal if everyone in the school is empowered to do their best. The *New York Times* columnist, David Brooks wrote a wonderful column on the power of the school principal to create a culture of learning and excellence.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/opinion/good-leaders-schools.html> That should come as no surprise. His observations are strongly supported in the applied and academic leadership literature. We have all worked for leaders who helped us blossom or crushed our spirit. The impact of the leadership skills of the Principal and Administrators is multiplied through the students for decades to come.

Third is involvement of the parents and community. Involved parents and a caring community make a difference. Parents who are aware, involved and demonstrate that they care have a tremendous impact on school outcomes. All the stories about the immigrant experience support the importance of parental involvement. Immigrants came to our country to have a better life, and they know that education holds the keys to future economic success.

Finally, there is programming so that we can adjust to the specific learning needs for each student and each community. We have seen how preschool can create the foundation that leads to a lifetime of achievement or how vocational programs can lead to a strong economic future. Districts are now investing in alternative schools so that they can customize the learning environment to improve the learning outcomes for those students who are most at risk. Similarly, each community faces a range of complex issues that are unique. A decentralized, empowered approach that has flexibility to act locally, yet has access to resources that create economies of scale can enable responses that make sense at the community and state levels.

These bills are not focused on educational achievement nor do they encourage any of the known strategies that lead to increased performance of school districts.

I encourage you to oppose SB738, SB 457 and SB874 and any other legislation that opens the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut public schools.