

Hello, my name is Michele Tupper and I am a parent of 3 children from the town of Wilton. I am here to voice my opposition to Bill numbers SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874 as well as any future legislation that includes forced school regionalization in our CT schools- in any form.

I have never been involved with anything like this before, but these bills will negatively impact my children's education, which is of the utmost importance to me. So, I find myself stepping out of my comfort zone- educating friends, posting information on social media, attending meetings, writing letters to all of you, and driving to Hartford to fight for the quality of my children's education, as well as my right to be a part of what that looks like.

My husband and I moved to Connecticut from Texas not intending to stay more than a few years. We wanted to work in NYC, then head back to TX. But we fell in love with the beauty of New England and purchased our first home in Norwalk, an old Victorian we took to renovating with a passion for 6 years. We loved living there. We had great neighbors and friends, access to the beach and outdoor summer concerts, museums and shopping and lots of great restaurants and close access to everything we needed. Norwalk has great amenities.

Our first child was 4 when we began looking into the Norwalk school system. We quickly concluded that they were not at all what we wanted for our children. Both of us had grown up in great school districts in TX, so we had a decision to make. Enroll our kids in private schools at significant cost and stay in our Norwalk home and community, sell our freshly renovated home and head back to Texas as planned, or sell our home and find a new school system and community in CT with educational values more aligned to our own.

We weren't making enough to move out of Norwalk, so my husband had to leave his great job at Bridgewater Associates to find a better paying job quickly. We then researched every town in the area, weighing the cost of living against the quality of their school system. Wilton was more affordable than most towns, and though there were less amenities than in Norwalk, the schools were outstanding. We sold our freshly restored Victorian in Norwalk at a profit, but quickly found that even with that extra money, and even with my husband's new job, what we had to spend on a home in Wilton would only get us another project home, again in need of a complete renovation. It was very disheartening. But we decided that the quality of education for our children was our priority and worth the sacrifice. Let me be clear, we moved away from Norwalk to Wilton solely for the schools.

We are not wealthy and we are definitely not elitist as some have charged. We struggle and sacrifice to live here. We've been renovating our 114 year old home ourselves for 14 years now and we're nowhere near done. Even doing all the work ourselves, we spend a disproportionate amount of our income on our mortgage and renovation costs. We have a well and our own water treatment system that needs constant, expensive attention. We don't have city garbage collection, and the larger, heavily wooded lots in Wilton require a lot of expensive maintenance. The property taxes are crushingly high, and Wilton has still not recovered from the 2008 recession, though most other comparative CT towns have. Our home, that we've spent many thousands of dollars bringing up to normal living standards (though we still have

vintage 1940 bathrooms and no air conditioning), is no longer worth what we paid for it and we would take a big loss on it if we sold because everyone is leaving CT, not moving in. Let me repeat- we are not wealthy and (provided we could sell our house), it would be a lot easier and less expensive to live somewhere else.

Literally, the only reason we are here is for the schools. And they're hard. Our 3 children have struggled here, and we've had to be very involved with their school work to help them succeed. We had heard that Wilton schools had excellent special education services, but we did not anticipate needing them. As it turns out, we did need them and we're very thankful that those services have also been outstanding. 2 of our 3 children have 504 plans. We have worked closely with the schools and they have been wonderful and supportive.

Several years ago, I became involved with the Wilton Education Foundation which is a non-profit organization created to support our schools. Our mission statement is as follows: "The Wilton Education Foundation is dedicated to enriching the learning experience for our students by providing ongoing professional development of our teachers, the latest in innovative and interactive teaching tools, support for music and the arts, and "beyond the classroom" experiences to provide our children with the confidence and skills to succeed in college and beyond."

With a few corporate sponsorships, individual donations, and dedicated volunteers, we compensate for areas not included in the district budget. We engage the community in several creative fundraising events throughout the year, that then support activities and programs that are designed to "inspire learning and motivate students of all ages through fun, creative, innovative, experiences." The success of this organization in our community is a testament to how involved parents are in the quality of their children's education, and how well supported the schools are by the community. Wilton residents are passionate about our schools and we rally around our schools as a community. People move to Wilton from all over the state and nationwide because Wilton has a reputation for excellent schools and an involved, supportive community. It's why we chose Wilton. We have built something special here that can't be duplicated on a large scale.

The power of governing our schools needs to be in the hands of those that live in the community. We've all worked hard to make them what they are and forced redistricting through SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874 takes away the one thing that is most important to us as parents and as a community. I understand that the state needs to save money, but it can't be at the cost of quality education and the loss of our rights to self-govern our district. If the quality of our schools is degraded by forced regionalization, or through penalty tactics for noncompliance, there is no reason to be struggling here. We would have a much better quality of life elsewhere on our income, and we would leave CT, even if we lose money on our home, which we certainly would. And who is moving in to buy it anyway? There's a mass exodus occurring in CT. It is becoming hard to justify living here. We love our town, our schools, our small-town community, our drafty old home that's in constant need of repairs, the beauty of

New England, and all the trees. But without control over our own school districts, combined with a serious decline in their quality, we'd just as soon leave.

We would prefer to stay. Please OPPOSE bills SB 738, SB 457, SB 874 and all regionalization bills, as well as any other effort to force consolidation of CT public schools. It is our right to govern ourselves and choose our own educational standards!

Thank you for your consideration.