

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

Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit testimony in opposition to SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874.

I speak to you against these bills and any future iteration of these or other pieces of legislation which seek to compel small towns to merge their schools or share resources with those of other towns against their will in any degree or fashion. I also oppose the recent crescendo of measures which seek to extract ever more resources from my town and its constituents.

Connecticut is known nationwide for the quality of its schools and my family has chosen to be here, instead of our home state of Texas, in part, to benefit from them. My wife and I moved from Norwalk to Wilton over a decade ago solely for the schools. We chose Wilton because the community is fully and impressively engaged in the education of its children - and that fact is reflected in the school's results. Parents voices are heard and acted upon and teachers and staff are caring, hands-on, and accessible.

I won't go into detail, but we gave up many public services offered in Norwalk to be in Wilton. We also had to spend much more money for a comparable home in Wilton which meant a painfully high mortgage. We had to pay twice as much in property taxes. We gave up the beautifully maintained Norwalk beaches and free summer concerts. A lot of the nice things that Norwalk has, Wilton doesn't. And that's OK. We value the freedom to choose what our towns will be like. Wilton has chosen to forgo many services enjoyed by others in favor of having the best schools possible. Our schooling is excellent because we sacrifice for it, we dedicate enormous amounts of time to it, and we are fully committed to and engaged in it.

Studies show that compulsory school consolidations in other states have not yielded savings. An analysis by Governing Magazine suggests that Connecticut's administrative costs aren't out far from aligning with our neighboring states. Perhaps the state could save money in some schools, but I believe that giving lawmakers the legal discretion to consolidate whatever schools they want to imperils all of us. In the end, given the weak arguments I have heard raised thus far in favor of these consolidations, I believe that these proposed measures are less about saving money and more about seizing control and redistributing resources. But we are already a generous state when it comes to education. Even Connecticut's poorest schools receive significantly more money per student than the national average. But, according to the New York Times, Connecticut's poorest schools have performed worse than even perennial underperforming Mississippi and Arkansas, all while spending significantly more money. The least funded schools in our neighboring state Massachusetts have realized meaningfully better results than our own schools with less money. Money isn't pixie dust - it doesn't guarantee good outcomes. Connecticut towns with the best educational outcomes are those who value it more than anything else. There's something else afoot in our poorly performing schools that merits significant analysis and soul-searching.

I have heard some legislators denigrate Connecticut's affluent small towns saying that we are rich folk who just don't want to share. First, this is despicable, unhelpful language and more importantly, it's untrue. Our communities reflect the full range of socio-economic groups. Fairfield county comprises only a quarter of the State's population, yet we provide the bulk of the state's tax revenue. Not only that, we receive the smallest share of government assistance back, and we do so year after year. And why do we submit to this? We do it because we are generous. We do it because we love the communities of our own making which reflect our values. Force unwanted change upon us, particularly where our schools are concerned, and you undermine the very reason for our being here.

And let me be clear - if you say that you are against forced school mergers, in whole or in part, but say that you support punishing towns who refuse to merge by withholding funds, manipulating formulas, fining us or other such measures, we recognize that you, in fact, favor of these compulsory mergers. We are clever enough to see through the ruse.

I understand that many of you legislators have inherited a financial mess. Others of you are partly to blame for it. I trust that there are some inequities among schools that should be remedied. However, if your actions imperil our children's educations, it will mark the beginning of the end of Connecticut's nationwide reputation for school excellence. It will also throw gasoline on the outward migration of State residents in which my family would likely take part. We're willing to pay the high taxes that we have (but please no more for heaven's sake). We're willing to disproportionately fund state government. We're willing to strive to thrive in a state that has become increasingly unfriendly to commerce. But threaten to diminish our towns and our children's educations and you extinguish one of Connecticut's last redeeming features.

I thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony and urge you to defeat these bills early - before they cause even more damage than they already have.

Sincerely,

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