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February 27, 2019

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

To: Members of the Education Committee

As parents of Wilton Public School students, we strongly oppose SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874 and any other bill that opens the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut Public Schools.

We are both graduates of Wilton High School class of 1989. We moved back to Wilton in 2013 with the primary purpose of our two children getting an outstanding public-school education in a small-town setting. Prior to that, we lived in Manhattan for our jobs and then Norwalk for Metro North New Haven line proximity to Manhattan for work.

Both of our children started their public-school education in Norwalk. With exposure to a Connecticut city elementary school, we quickly realized what we wanted for our children's education is what a small-town such as Wilton offers. Such a district is a small community with likeminded parents very involved in the education process, local town officials committed to preserving and improving our education system through budgetary increases not cuts, and caring teachers that can focus on meeting the needs of our children rather than battling administrative problems and lack of funding.

We worry that the proposals for regionalization put forth in these bills will negatively affect the quality of education in Wilton, as well as other small towns in the state, while not amounting to any significant cost savings in education. There is no proof that any cost savings realized for the state will improve the quality of education for school systems with significant budgetary issues. Yet there are many obvious reasons that forced regionalization could be detrimental to all towns involved.

For us and for many people in Wilton or other towns like Wilton, the education system here -- as it stands -- is the primary reason we chose to live in and buy a home in Wilton. That choice came with many other sacrifices that we are willing to adapt to because education for our children is our first priority. Our quality is top notch and as residents and former students of this town, we find the excellence can be attributed to these three pillars in our small-town education system: leadership, community and special services.

First, our leaders are accessible. Small towns such as ours participate as a community in discussions lead by our elected Board of Education members and our hired administrators. Families have access to these leaders at many local meetings regarding our schools or community. These leaders know our town, our families, our children, each school, and that enables them to make sound decisions about what is best in each of our schools. Therefore, ideas put forth in these bills such as sharing a Superintendent and other administrators would strip away the “feet on the ground” knowledge that enables the best decision making abilities for school systems on a local level. Further, combining roles as important as these not only leave so much room for error, but in the end require additional personnel at lower levels to make up for the lack of focus. There is no evidence that cost savings from eliminating administrator salaries will leave consolidated administrators able to do their job effectively and without added salaries elsewhere.

Second, forced regionalization would dismantle the established individual communities around our education systems. It is these communities that monitor and hold our schools accountable for the quality of education being put forth. The objective of these bills is to institute cost savings; not one of these bills mentions quality of education. Cost savings is an uncertainty as there is no empirical data to show that school systems with greater than 2000 students benefit from regionalization. Using the Wilton/Norwalk probate court region as an example, what we CAN say for certainty is that an amalgamation of our ~4000 students with Norwalk’s ~17,000 students will make a “small-town” community with oversight and involvement become a minimized voice in upholding the quality and character of our schools. Rural towns under 2000 students likely have the very same strength of character in their communities. For these towns, there must be choices for regionalization on a local level as each town sees fit – in many cases already in Connecticut this has worked well.

The final pillar of Wilton’s system is our town’s excellence in special services. We shudder to think what will happen to programs such as Special Education in a large regionalized school system. With one of our children on an Individual Education Plan receiving services for literacy and executive functioning deficits, we know first-hand how cumbersome the whole SPED process can be for families, administrators, teachers, and budgets. Wilton has a relatively new Assistant Superintendent of Special Services who has spent a great deal of time getting to know the staff and families currently implementing special services to students. Additionally, she is looking for new solutions for our schools in terms of special needs identification and general education integration. Supported by our community, she has identified that more staff is needed to serve families and students appropriately. These types of local decisions would likely not happen in a regional setting governed by the state. Economies of scale should not be a priority especially when dealing with this subset of students who need greater attention and instruction. These students are already more at risk of “falling through the cracks” thus regionalization would leave them even more vulnerable.

In conclusion, as parents and home owners in Wilton, we strongly oppose SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874 and any other bill that opens the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut Public Schools. We feel regionalization will destroy, not improve the public-school education system in

Connecticut. Wilton is just one small-town example of many within the state of Connecticut. Forced regionalization will negatively impact the public-school districts that are currently thriving at the cost of “potentially” gaining funds for state budget deficits in education. Voting for any type of forced regionalization just pushes current residents, future residents and thus businesses and future businesses to move to other states. With Connecticut already suffering from poor economic decisions, why strain the economy further by compromising our education system and making it a less desirable state to live and work in. We implore you to vote against these bills.

Thank you for your consideration.

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