

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I stand in vehement opposition to SB 738, SB 457, SB 874, and any other bill or portion of a bill that would open the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut public schools. I ask that my testimony be read into the record at the public hearing on March 1, 2019.

I am deeply disturbed that none of the aforementioned bills mentions educational quality or expected educational outcomes should the state force regionalization. Education is more than a line item in the state budget. It is, at this moment of troubled times in CT, perhaps our **greatest asset**. Our educational excellence still draws new residents to our towns and keeps struggling residents from leaving until their children complete high school. Great education is a huge selling point, both for individuals looking for a home and for corporations who would make the decision to move many employees into our state. Passing a regionalization bill would result in less inflows to the state and in huge outflows from the state to neighboring states in stronger economic shape and without the problems of regionalized education. Revitalizing our state demands that lawmakers recognize and protect our greatest assets while strategizing ways to fix existing problems. We need to find ways to compete with neighboring states around the financial hub of NYC. Regionalizing schools will further plunge CT into the morass we currently face.

Like most of our friends and neighbors, we moved to Weston specifically for its excellent school system. The town offers very little besides our schools and lovely open spaces—we have no commercial endeavors to support our tax base and most of our services are privately contracted and paid for (well, septic, garbage removal, snow removal on private roads, etc.). Contrary to the popular characterization of our residents, many of us have struggled to pay our taxes and remain in town through difficult economic times and have done so specifically so our children could remain in a top notch school. Having our children remain local (in town) for their education is crucial to our social fabric as well. We all chose a small town deliberately. Our children have access to opportunities in athletics and extracurriculars that they would not have if they were absorbed by a larger district. We come together as friends and neighbors at these athletic and cultural events. Athletic and extracurricular opportunities are tightly tied to student happiness and increased graduation rates (see study mentioned below).

I have combed the literature and am unable to find any study that supports enhanced educational outcomes for regionalized schools. In fact, most studies find the opposite, including the one funded by the Harford Foundation for Public Giving, which suggests that the optimal school size is somewhere around 2500 to 3000. The reality upholds this suggestion. If you look at the highest performing schools in the state, they are all smaller schools run by smaller suburbs. Clearly, we are doing something right. We should be your model going forward, not absorbed into larger, less well functioning systems with lesser or poor educational outcomes. The Hartford Foundation document actually suggests that deconsolidation may be the answer to Hartford's problem, not regionalization and consolidation. Smaller class size is well known to be a strong factor in educational excellence, and is even more important for schools with at risk students. The Hartford Foundation study suggests that high schools with at risk students be no larger than 500 students. In fact, a quick glance through US News and World Report tells you everything you need to know. If you look at the national ranking of CT's top performing school districts, you will find that they are hundreds (in some cases nearly a thousand) places higher than the top performing school districts in regionalized states. Absorb that for a moment, please. There is also no support whatsoever in the literature for the claim that regionalization results in cost savings.

Research conducted by the National Education Policy Center concluded that benefits from consolidation are “vastly overestimated” and an article in Education Finance and Policy suggested that consolidation may actually increase costs. Higher transportation costs, leveling teachers’ salaries up, additional layers of middle level administrative and administrative support staff are just the tip of the iceberg and represent increases to the operating budget, not savings. Increased class size, less personal interaction with teachers and administrators, reduced educational outcomes and college opportunities, longer bus rides (and therefore reduced study time and sleep), fewer athletic and extracurricular opportunities, increased school closures in bad weather, and issues of displacement are just the tip of the human cost of regionalization to our children. The Hartford Foundation study suggests that deconsolidation of the district’s large schools would save money.

I attended a regional junior and senior high school in New Jersey. Our town was one of four districts sending to the regional, and we happened to have the strongest elementary academic programs and performance. I can honestly say that I wasted two full years of educational opportunity while less well prepared students were brought to level; this was recognized by the school at the time as they repeatedly tried to move me two grades forward to offer me appropriate challenge. This wasn’t acceptable to me socially, however (what 12 year old wants to be thrown in with high school kids?), especially since I was also adjusting to the much bigger school size and meeting so many new kids.

In closing, I applaud your search for ways to solve some of Connecticut’s most pressing financial issues but vehemently oppose all school regionalization proposals. Regionalization does not enhance educational outcomes, nor does it save money. Connecticut’s small towns are providing our state with our greatest asset and draw card in these tough times: our highly ranked educational systems. Our residents have deliberately chosen small town life and towns with great educational systems: we have the right to keep control of our highly functioning systems. Similarly, I oppose any “incentivized” regionalization plan that actually takes our state monies if we don’t comply; this is not an incentive plan but a punishment, not carrot but stick. Not only would regionalization dismantle the state’s greatest asset, but it would decimate your constituents. Many of us struggle to stay where we are so our children can reap the benefits of the school system (and for this reason I oppose a state property tax as well); regionalization would cause a plunge in home values in our areas, devaluing households’ single largest asset. It would also drastically reduce the number of individuals looking to move into state (we have family members who have put such plans on hold) and would detract from our attractiveness to large corporations whom we must court to fix our larger economic woes.

Please vote against SB 738, SB 457, SB 874, and any other bill that advances school regionalization.

Sincerely,

Jill Castro
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