

February 22, 2019

Dear Members of the Education Committee,

I'm writing today with testimony for the public hearing on Friday March 1, 2019 for Senate Bills 738 and 457 regarding the consolidation of school districts. I am unable to make the trip to Hartford.

I've owned an education reform consulting practice, specializing in school and district improvement for nine years, I am currently a school board member for Norwalk Public Schools, and I am a Connecticut resident and the mother of a toddler.

Regarding SB457:

For a variety of reasons, I strongly advocate for the consolidation of schools, especially very small districts (i.e. less than 1,000 students or so). Consolidation can increase the educational opportunities for students by sharing more specialized teachers and being able to offer additional course offerings, it can save resources by sharing staff amongst more students, it can provide additional extracurricular options (i.e. enough students for multiple clubs or sports), it can increase the effectiveness of the system by allowing more specialized staff at central office (i.e. a superintendent, and a grants manager, and an chief academic officers, as opposed to finding a superintendent that does all three jobs), it can provide more growth opportunities for staff, and it can provide students with additional peers to broaden their social circles.

But, consolidating school districts can be filled with controversy and push back from local communities. The geographic distances of potential consolidating districts must also be taken into account to allow for reasonable bus/transportation times to school for students and their families, especially if families rely on public transportation systems. Transparency and the incentives for consolidation are incredibly important. I have heard of some states offering incentives to do so, before forcing consolidations by law. It may make sense to create a law that offers one or two years of incentives to consolidate to encourage communities to want to consolidate, before using the stick of forced consolidation.

Are there extreme examples, maybe more rural areas, where waivers might be necessary? What supports can the State Education Agency provide to support districts through the transitions?

If done carefully, this bill could result in overall cost savings, while also providing increase educational and extracurricular opportunities to students.

Regarding SB738:

While this bill wouldn't apply to Norwalk due to our population size, it is fraught with questions and concerns. Some of the recommendations from above are shared, but this bill seems ill-conceived and would likely result in chaos and much controversy in towns and cities across the state.

When the bill was first released, the town of Wilton was up in arms within days protesting combining with Norwalk. Much of that controversy was misguided, with tinges of racism and classism, and fear mongering about not wanting Wilton's elite students to be brought down by Norwalk's students (which is far from the truth as Norwalk edges closer to Wilton's performance each year).

The bill proposes that a commission be created to develop a plan to consolidate districts under 40,000 residents, similar to the probate regions. While I applaud an effort to create a commission to develop a plan before forcing something like this forward, the timeline seems aggressive and unrealistic. Why 40,000 residents, shouldn't the number of students be more important? There's some information about a phased in approach for collective bargaining, there is no information on the effectiveness or quality of education to students, the governance or leadership for the newly created district, and no information about the possible costs and bus time increases that might be required to consolidate – especially in high-traffic corridors like Fairfield County. What impact might Sheff vs O'Neill have on these consolidations, especially if two very different districts (via racial/ethnic demographics) combine?

If the bill is approved, the commission will have a huge task to develop a plan for such consolidations that work for different contexts across the state. This bill, especially with its arbitrary suggestions of consolidations along the probate court lines, seems like it's overreaching and will create more problems than it's designed to supposedly fix.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I agree that consolidation can be a useful tool, and working against local control (which every state has and things they have it worse than any other state) is an uphill battle, but the educational quality and opportunities for our students need to be factored into any bill. Cost savings alone cannot and should not drive policy.

Thank you,

Julie Corbett

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