

March 1, 2019

Chairman McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty and distinguished Committee Members, thank you for allowing me to testify today on Senate Bills 454, 738, 874, and 7150.

My name is Ruth DeLuca. I am a resident of the Town of Wilton, a citizen of the State of Connecticut, and a mother of three children, ages 7, 5 and 2. I oppose Senate Bill (SB) 454, 738 and the Governor's budget bill, SB 874, all of which, while varying in method, seek to impose forced school district regionalization. I also oppose SB 7150, mandating municipal responsibility for state negotiated teacher pension agreements.

My husband and I support public education. We are proud products of public schools. With the support of our families, schools, and communities, along with hard work and dedication, we not only have successful and productive careers, we are also informed and engaged citizens. We deliberately chose the Town of Wilton and the State of Connecticut for our children. Wilton and Connecticut share our value of community and public education and also understand the corresponding commitment and obligation that entails. Connecticut should be proud of its strong educational system and small community values. Senate Bill (SB) 454, 738 and the Governor's budget bill, SB 874, make me question Connecticut's commitment to education, the value of local community control, and future prosperity. Harford's current assault on education and local control also make me question my commitment to Connecticut.

As engaged citizens, we are acutely aware of Connecticut's current budget crisis and current economic hardships. In difficult economic times, it is not unreasonable to seek out "efficiencies" in government run, supported, and/or funded programs. It is unconscionable that student well-being and the future success of our state is being sacrificed over a state created budget crisis and an unfunded state pension mandate both of which local municipalities had no influence of design and have no control.

Importantly, there is no reason to expect the presumed benefits of regionalization will materialize. Current research suggests that savings for taxpayers, fiscal efficiencies, and curricular improvements are unlikely. More telling is research showing that recent consolidation has likely gone too far thus violating efficiency requirements and thereby producing diseconomies of scale and impeding improved student performance. Consolidation studies report increased costs relating to transportation, operation, management and supervision, security and guidance.¹

These findings are especially salient when consolidation results from state policy that implements large-scale forced consolidation. In fact, the National Education Policy Center found that statewide mandates for consolidation and minimum sizes for schools and districts "always prove arbitrary and often prove unworkable."² The Connecticut Office of Fiscal Analysis released a report looking at cost savings of the

¹ Craig Howley, Jerry Johnson, and Jennifer Petrie, "Consolidation of Schools and Districts: What the Research Says and What it Means," National Education Policy Center (2011), 8.

<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/consolidation-schools-districts>.

²Id at 13.

current seventeen regional school districts and found modest savings. Specifically the report noted that the “state should not rely on shared services to make a significant dent in the state’s K-12 budget.”³

The same report also specifically finds that in Connecticut research suggests that bigger is not better – finding that districts with 2,500 to 3,000 students are cost-effective and foster educational achievement.⁴ And that “the potential for high educational achievement diminishes for at-risk students when they attend large schools that are disconnected from their communities; and that “smaller school size mediates that association between socioeconomic status and achievement.”⁵

Research consistently finds that larger size is associated with reduced rates of student participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, more dangerous school environments, lower graduation rates, and larger achievement gaps related to poverty, race, and gender.⁶ School and district consolidation also have dramatic negative effects on the vitality and well-being of communities. The loss of a school erodes a community’s social and economic base. The loss permanently diminishes a town’s sense of community, identity, and democracy – sometimes even to the point of abandonment.⁷

The Wilton School District is both cost effective and education effective. We make hard choices and responsibly manage our finances. We are regularly ranked within the top 10 for the State and top 500 for the Country in student achievement. State policy should support these achievements. And State policy should not further burden municipalities, especially non-distressed and responsible municipalities like Wilton, by requiring coverage of teacher pensions over which they have no contractual control.

It is time for Hartford to make hard choices without diminishing its most valuable asset – education districts like Wilton’s. Flourishing education systems make states more productive, dynamic, competitive and healthier and warrant policy frameworks to support and sustain their achievements. Forced regionalization, whether overt or de facto, and pension push down is not supportive policy – I urge all committee members to vote no on SB 454, 738, 874, and 7150.

Thank you for allowing me to testify. I am happy to address any questions.

Ruth DeLuca
Wilton, Connecticut

³ Orlando J. Rodriguez, “K-12 Regionalization in Connecticut: Pros, Cons and Surprises,” Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, http://www.hfpg.org/files/7915/3013/0299/Regionlization_Report_Draft_as_of_6-27-2018.pdf.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Craig Howley, Jerry Johnson, and Jennifer Petrie, “Consolidation of Schools and Districts: What the Research Says and What it Means,” National Education Policy Center (2011), 9. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/consolidation-schools-districts>.

⁷ Thomas A. Lyson, “What Does a School Mean to Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York,” Journal of Research in Rural Education, 17, 131-137. <http://cardi.cals.cornell.edu>.