



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Amy Dowell, Connecticut State Director
Education Reform Now Connecticut
March 1, 2019

Re: S.B. 874, An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut

Proposed S.B. 457, An Act Concerning the Size of School Districts

Proposed S.B. 738, an Act Concerning the Creation of Regional School Districts

Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members McCarty and Berthel, and Members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 874, and Proposed Senate Bills 457 and 738. I applaud you for undertaking this hearing on district consolidation today.

Across the country, student populations are trending down. Over the last decade, Connecticut's student population has decreased by approximately 35,000 students. This means that, in the near future, students and teachers in districts with decreasing enrollment will suffer in the face of scarce financial resources. Some of our smallest school districts are already struggling to comprehensively meet students' needs. With that context, it's imperative that we have this crucial conversation about how to share services in pursuit of continuing Connecticut's national reputation for high-quality schools.

As the Connecticut State Director of Education Reform Now, **I'm here to voice my support for a substantive dialogue on shared services and school district consolidation that has equity at its heart.** The Governor's bill, S.B. 457, and S.B. 738 all offer a good start towards a potential public policy. However, I think we can agree that the challenge in front of us should not be addressed through band-aids. Rather, we need a thoughtful, iterative approach to overcome obstacles and create opportunities for collaboration.

Sections 1-7 of **the Governor's bill (SB 874)** are promising because they take seriously the magnitude of a statewide effort at consolidation. The Governor's vision for a Commission on Shared School Services is commendable for its inclusion of a packed calendar of practical deliverables. These will help us to carefully and inclusively deliberate how our state can encourage and reward consolidation. However, the Committee's planning and reporting work, as written, would continue through December 2020 and for much of the next decade, providing time to slow down or undermine any efforts. ERN encourages the state to also take steps to face the realities of our declining enrollment in the coming biennium.

S.B. 457 is a meaningful starting point for these conversations because it begins to address the state's smallest districts, of which there are far too many. Of Connecticut's 166 local and regional school districts, 50% have fewer than 2,000 students enrolled. However, according to a UConn study conducted in 2010, the optimal district size in Connecticut, in terms of educational achievement among students and cost effectiveness, is approximately 2,800

students. S.B. 457 would help us start shifting these districts to a size that is more efficient and more beneficial to students by cutting administrative costs that ought not be duplicated. These are the types of measures that will allow us to provide the comprehensive education that students need to succeed, which is otherwise out of reach in many small districts today.

At a higher level, however, part of this dialogue must also be a moral discussion centered around equity. By contemplating large, regional districts, **S.B. 738** begins to address the problems of massive inequity that have long plagued our state. Although it is not clear to me that regional consolidation would be pragmatic on the scale described in this bill, we do need to address the disparate degrees of access and opportunity afforded to students within neighboring districts.

As an alternative to large, regional consolidation efforts, I urge the Committee to consider expanding the state's already impressive Open Choice program to all regions in the state. We might begin to address some of the declining enrollment in smaller districts if they can host students from other neighborhoods.

Open Choice is designed to reduce isolation among student populations along racial, ethnic, and economic lines. It allows urban students to attend public schools in nearby suburban towns, and vice versa. And it empowers parents by allowing them to select the school programs that best serve the needs of their individual children. Every family in our state should have options like these. However, the Open Choice program is currently limited only to the regions of Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and New London. By expanding Open Choice to all regions in our state, we would create new opportunities for geographically small districts that might have a lot to offer to students living in other neighborhoods. It allows us to maximize existing quality public school infrastructure and provide access for students in a cost-efficient manner (certainly, cheaper than building new schools).

For these reasons, I believe that expanding Open Choice needs to be included in conversations about district consolidation and regionalization. By including Open Choice in this discussion, we can begin to approach a wholistic public policy solution that addresses our state's ballooning education costs, while also improving educational access and opportunity. On behalf of Education Reform Now, I look forward to a robust conversation that protects the best parts of our public schools, while progressing towards solutions for all students.

