

Testimony of SEEK-CT  
Before Education Committee on Regionalization  
March 1, 2019

Chairman Sanchez, Chairman McCrory and members of the Committee,

I am here today representing Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK-CT), Connecticut's first organization of parents, providers, advocates and attorneys fighting for excellent education for the 70,000 Connecticut students with disabilities. We have found that teachers, administrators and academics have been invited to sit at the decision-making table when crucial questions of special education are decided; but parents and advocates for students with disabilities have been left without a seat. SEEK-CT seeks to remedy that oversight.

The Committee has in front of it four bills seeking to consolidate small school districts into single larger ones. By point of reference, Connecticut, for the 2013-14 school year, ranked 21st among the states in average enrollment per school district, with just over 3,000 students per district on average. The range was from Montana at 354 students per district to Hawaii, with a single statewide district, at 190,000 students per district. Looked at otherwise, Montana has fewer than two schools per district on average, while New York has four, Maryland has 56, and Hawaii has 290. Connecticut, on the other hand, averages slightly more than 6. In other words, Connecticut is not particularly out of line nationally.

Still, the pressure for regionalization stems from budgetary concerns. Connecticut districts range from Union with 90 students up to Bridgeport with 21,000. We have 19 districts with enrollment below 500 and 8 districts above 10,000 (with two more -- Fairfield and West Hartford -- just below the 10,000 number). There are 42 districts with less than 1,000 enrollment. There are certain basic costs to running a school district, but they are not truly fixed. In other words, many of the smaller towns have part-time superintendents and individuals who both serve

as special education directors and special education teachers. Instead of hiring related service personnel, smaller districts contract for speech and language, physical therapy and occupational therapy on an as needed basis.

Still, there is some correlation between district size and average per pupil cost. The 42 districts with fewer than 1,000 students have an average per pupil cost of \$23,295, while the 10 districts with 9,900 students or more have an average per pupil cost of \$16,368. Yet, these figures may be misleading. Among the smaller districts are the rich towns of Canaan, Cornwall, Sherman and Salisbury. Among the large districts are the impoverished cities of Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven. Waterbury, and New Britain. The differential may be largely the result of the fact that we still rely heavily on property taxes to fund education.

SEEK-CT is an organization focused on special education. We have, frankly mixed feeling about regionalization. On the one hand, students with disabilities need districts with large enough funding bases to create and maintain excellent programs in reading, in autism, in social skills. On the other hand, students with disabilities are ill-served by regional centers providing specialized instruction that exclude them from typical students. In our experience seeking appropriate services for students with disabilities, we have not found that larger districts necessarily provide better services than smaller districts, or that richer districts necessarily provide better services than poorer districts.

What we frequently run into is the fact that the "I" in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the "I" in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) is ignored. Instead, special education directors seek to force students with disabilities into pre-existing programs that often do not serve the needs of the student. Sometimes, this may reflect an effort to save money,

but, more often, it stems from a bureaucratic mindset that places organizational structure above individual needs.

Whatever this Committee decided to do about regionalization, SEEK-CT asks that the following principles be observed in the design of the program:

1. Students with disabilities must be educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent practicable. That means simply that grouping all students with disabilities from a variety of towns into a single, self-contained program is unacceptable, without regard to any alleged cost-savings involved.

2. The excess cost grant provides some level of protection against the catastrophic costs of a single severely-impaired student in a district. Regrettably, the excess cost grant is the only state funding stream directly for special education. Regardless of the size of school districts, the state needs to provide funding to create and maintain strong special education programs in districts, particularly in the areas of reading, autism, executive capacity and social intelligence. Some sharing of staff and resources between small districts can produce better services for students with disabilities.

3. There has been serious growth in the proportion of district education budgets that go to administration. Some of this growth is required by the increasing need for social workers, psychologists, and counselors to deal with the epidemic of anxiety that has swept Connecticut schools over the last few years. Still some of this growth is directly attributable to the ever-increasing requirements that the Legislature has levied on local school districts. An example of this is P.A. 18-183 which, in response to reports of the State Auditor, placed extensive requirements on school districts when they place students with disabilities to private schools.

The overhead costs of maintaining an independent school district are, to a significant degree, driven by Legislative mandates.

4. In the special education space, consolidation of services is not justified. However, consolidation of evaluation could be. We see no major advantage of having school psychologist who spend most of their time testing students at each and every school in the state. We need counselors in each school, but the testing function could be consolidated, resulting both in improved quality and reduced costs.

5. The federal IDEA regulations on least restrictive environment provide that a student with a disability be placed "as close as possible to the child's home." 34 C.F.R. §300.116. Clearly, regionalization could lead to the closing of a number of local schools. While nothing in the IDEA prohibits school consolidation, there is an important public policy in maintaining neighborhood schools. With school consolidation inevitably comes increased transportation time and increased transportation costs. For some students with disabilities, increased time on a bus or van can have a severe impact on the student's ability to learn.

Regionalization is a complicated, controversial issue. If this process moves forward, SEEK-CT wants to be part of the process to ensure that the interests of Connecticut's 670,000 students with disabilities are protected.