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Testimony of Christine Finkelstein
Chairman, Wilton Board of Education
In Opposition to

- **SB 738 – An Act Concerning the Creation of Regional School Districts**
- **SB 457 – An Act Concerning the Size of School Districts**
- **SB 874 – An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut**

Education Committee – Public Hearing
Legislative Office Building
March 1, 2019

Chairman McCrory, Chairman Sanchez and members of the Education Committee:

On behalf of the Wilton Board of Education, I am pleased to submit the following remarks in opposition to SB 738, SB 457 and SB 874, which collectively call for forced regionalization of school services and/or school districts.

Let me begin with a few words about the Wilton community, and the important role of the Wilton Public Schools in our town. Quite simply, the Wilton Public Schools are the backbone of our community. Our semi-rural town does not have a beach, or a large commercial district, or major entertainment venues. We have our schools. A survey conducted in 2018 by the Wilton Board of Finance found more than 80 percent of residents said they chose to move to Wilton because of our high-quality schools.

Our community supports the schools in myriad ways, including strong attendance at Wilton Warrior athletic events, theatre productions that regularly perform to sold-out audiences, and our celebrated Warrior marching band, which performs annually at our Holiday Tree Lighting and Memorial Day Parade.

Most important, of course, community members support our schools with their tax dollars. Funding for the Wilton Schools accounts for 65 percent of our overall town budget. In recent years, as the state legislature has reduced – in some cases eliminated – Wilton’s share of education cost sharing (ECS) funding, our residents have been asked to dig even deeper, and shoulder costs previously paid through our state tax revenues.

The Wilton community is heavily invested in our schools and as such, our Board of Education is held to the highest levels of fiscal responsibility. Residents scrutinize every line in our budget, and hold us accountable for every penny. We are questioned every budget cycle about administrative staffing, class sizes, special education services, and many other factors that affect spending.

Every year we have the discussion, both internally and with town residents, about whether we have done enough to look for cost savings opportunities. “Aren’t there ways,” the line of questioning goes, “that we can find synergies with neighboring districts, opportunities to share services and reduce costs?”

The answer is the same every year: Where it makes sense for our students and our town, we will enter into shared service arrangements both within our town and with other districts.

I can cite several examples where we have realized efficiencies with our own Board of Selectmen, including:

- Elimination of two central office positions, the Wilton Public Schools director of finance and director of facilities, in favor of sharing personnel who perform similar services for our town.
- Partnering with the town for additional efficiencies in fuel and electricity purchases, medical claims administration and property and liability insurance costs.
- Most recently we are transitioning to a common financial software system, which will facilitate payments and recordkeeping, among other efficiencies.

And we have looked beyond Wilton’s borders for opportunities to share costs with neighboring and regional school districts. Recent examples include:

- We regularly engage in ride-sharing arrangements with neighboring towns to send students to regional programs that provide special education services that are not available in the Wilton Public Schools. This allows us to economize on transportation and avoid having to hire staff, or incur professional service costs to provide these services ourselves.
- Wilton high school students have the opportunity to participate in programs of study offered by regional schools, as a way to pursue academic interests through initiatives not offered at Wilton High School. These venues include:
 - The Center for Global Studies, which is located at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk;
 - The Academy for the Performing Arts, located in Trumbull, at the regional CES facility;
 - The Academy of Information Technology & Engineering, based in Stamford;
 - Henry Abbott Technical High School, located in Danbury; and
 - J.M. Wright Technical High School located in Stamford.

My final example is a good illustration of how our attempt to voluntarily find efficiencies now puts us at risk of being adversely affected by the legislation currently under review.

Until a few years ago, Wilton maintained three elementary schools. This included two Pre-K/2 schools that shared the same campus, as well as a separate 3-5 school. The two Pre-K/2 schools maintained separate principals and administrative teams, and also had their own unique cultures.

But in 2010, as student enrollment began to shift, and the effects of the economic recession took hold, we as a town made the decision to combine our two schools. It was a decision made by the town of Wilton, because it made sense for our community.

Now though, we stand to be penalized for this efficiency. Because we now have just two elementary schools, a provision in SB 874 would require us to share a superintendent with a neighboring district. Or, if we insist on keeping our own superintendent, that administrator's salary would be deducted from our state funding. It seems the author of this legislation has decided that we should have three elementary schools, not two.

If we had three schools, we would not be in this position. But since we as a town chose to pursue this efficiency, we are at risk of being penalized.

Clearly this makes no sense, and is a clear example of the danger of a "one size fits all" solution.

I cite these examples to demonstrate that the concept of shared services is certainly not new to Wilton, and that we already work both within our town and with neighboring districts to identify opportunities for cost efficiency.

Shared services are in everyone's interest, but only when they make sense for the affected communities.

While we can appreciate the state legislature's need to reduce costs, we urge you to tread very cautiously in tinkering with our system of locally-built-and-managed school districts. School districts exist to educate and nurture a community's children, and this responsibility must never be seen as negotiable.

As we are fond of saying in the Wilton schools, we have one chance to do right by our students. A student passes through our schools just once, meaning we have no room for error. Dismantling the Wilton Public Schools would impose grievous harm to the students in our community, as it would to students in all affected districts.

I urge you to reject all efforts – SB 738, SB 457 and SB874 – which look to mandate school consolidation or regionalization.

Thank you for your consideration.