

Testimony regarding SB 454/738
February 27, 2019

Senator Robert Sanchez and Senator Douglas McCrory, Co-Chairs, Education Committee
And Members of the Education Committee,

I am writing to testify against SB 454/738. As a current Wilton Board of Education member, a retired Superintendent of Schools (Ridgefield), and a long-term Wilton resident and taxpayer, I oppose SB 454/738 for many reasons:

1. People move to Wilton because of our schools. The schools are the heart of our community. As residents, we have known this anecdotally but it was recently affirmed in a professionally designed, statistically valid survey of residents initiated by our Board of Finance. SB 454/738 through forced school regionalization would destroy our tradition, identity, and reputation.
2. The Wilton Public School district is a high performing district with an excellent faculty, quality programs, engaged students, involved parents, and a supportive community. We have built a reputation over the past decades for educational excellence. SB 454/738 does nothing to improve the quality of our schools and instead threatens it. There is no research to demonstrate improved educational outcomes or significant savings by forced regionalization or consolidation of districts our size.
3. With a Town meeting form of government, the school budget goes out to referendum annually. Each year the budget is scrutinized, questioned, criticized, etc. by town Boards and at public hearings before going directly to the voters. There is strong community oversight of every local tax dollar spent. In recent years, the school budget increases have been extremely low. SB 454/738 could not improve on that.
4. Wilton schools and the town have worked together to find efficiencies and savings. Recently, the school business manager position and the town finance officer position have been combined into one position. In addition, the school facilities director has been combined with the town facility director. The town and schools have also invested in solar power for long-term energy savings. SB 454/738 provides only forced regionalization as a one-size-fits-all approach and does so without any research base. The bill completely omits research into other states (or case studies from anywhere) of successful voluntary cost savings measures between districts.

Here are some alternative ideas:

1. Consider administering state testing every other year rather than annually. Connecticut used to do this. It would save money and increase instructional time. As an educator, I don't think that extensive state testing data needs to be generated every year. Alternating years is sufficient to improve programming and monitor student progress, especially when considering the local assessments administered to students. I understand testing is federally mandated, but why not build the case for a waiver.
2. Support the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) priority to "Remove barriers and support incentives for voluntary interdistrict collaboration that provide efficiencies and

program enhancements through shared services.” One example - each district licenses student information and special education software, perhaps set up a state purchasing plans to bring down costs. The same could be done for hardware. Another area would be to assist districts in structuring consolidated bids for bus transportation.

3. Conduct research into other states’ successful voluntary cost-savings strategies between school districts and their impact on educational outcomes.

I understand, as most Connecticut residents do, that we are in a state fiscal crisis. I also understand that cost-saving proposals will always have their critics. However, SB 454/738 exemplifies the worst approach possible by forcing a wrong-headed, damaging, unproven, one-size fits all strategy on what is most precious and successful in Wilton – our schools.

Sincerely,

Deborah Low

Wilton Board of Education member

former Ridgefield Public Schools Superintendent (retired)

Long-time Wilton resident