

Attorney Dennis O'Brien
Attorneys O'Brien & Johnson
120 Bolivia Street, Willimantic, CT 06226
860-423-2860/208-2345
dennis.o.brien@snet.net
March 1, 2019

**Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Representative Barry,
Representative McCarty, and Members of the Planning and Development
Committee:**

Thank you for this opportunity to present input on **Governor's Bill No. 874**, and **Proposed Bills Nos. 457 and 738**, bills concerning potential school redistricting in our State of Connecticut.

I am an elected member of the Town Council of the Town of Windham. I have been a member of the bar of this state for forty-seven years. From 1980 to 1995, I was chief counsel and deputy director of Connecticut Legal Services, the statewide legal aid program. I later served as judge of probate for the District of Windham from January of 1999, until I retired due to aging out in January of 2011.

For the last four years of my judgeship, I served as first administrative judge of the Northeast Regional Children's Probate Court at Willimantic and Brooklyn. Since 1996, I also served at various times as town attorney for five Eastern Connecticut municipalities. I continue to be town attorney for Andover and Chaplin.

My strong interest in these bills comes in part from my personal experiences of growing up and being educated in New Britain and its public schools, and residing since 1974, and serving as a lawyer and public official in the former City of Willimantic in the Town of Windham. I come here today also perhaps more important because of my experiences as a lawyer and judge working with numerous low-income families with school children in urban centers throughout Connecticut, including Bridgeport, Waterbury, New Britain, New London, Hartford, New Haven and especially of course Windham/Willimantic.

For more than 20 years I have been speaking out strongly and writing letters and comments to newspapers and others throughout the State urging our citizens and public officials to take note of the detrimental effects that our fragmented and archaic "system" of public education in Connecticut has negatively impacted our State's economy and more important tens of thousands of urban center children due to the vast overconcentration of low income people in cities like Bridgeport, Waterbury, New Britain, New London, Hartford, New Haven and especially of course Windham/Willimantic.

I am going to be 76 years old this July and I thought the day would never come when I could attend a public hearing like this where bills like these addressing the ills of our fragmented system including the obvious diseconomies of scale and waste of public funds would be discussed. I salute this committee and the proponents of these bills for having the insight and courage to bring them here today!

Let me say one thing today about how the unnecessary overconcentration of the poor in urban center public schools impacts these children and their chances for success in life, something I learned as a child growing up in New Britain, a legal aid lawyer for 23 years, and a children's court judge in a town with far more than its share of poverty.

Most people who are lower income are in that status because they have relatively little education or training. I grew up in a family like that in New Britain. It is possible but unlikely that a relatively uneducated parent will teach their children the value, the necessity of being very well educated in today's world. Where poverty which presents so many other challenges to a family is overconcentrated as it is in our urban centers, the dominant culture of school children, especially for young males, is not aimed in the direction of academic success for a great many.

An overabundance of failure in school which has been happening and will in my opinion continue to happen in Connecticut urban centers absent sea change intervention results in what some call the achievement gap. The achievement gap is robbing tens of thousands of children of their futures. To the extent that they become unproductive adults virtually incapable of functioning in our modern economy, there are huge costs which are visited first and foremost on them, but also on the rest of the citizens of our State.

Eight or so years ago, my wife and Representative Susan Johnson submitted a bill to address inner city achievement gaps by consolidating 6 of the 7 urban center school districts I have mentioned with their contiguous suburban towns. The bill omitted Hartford because of the Sheff case. It drew only one other sponsor, and died an early death.

I bring Susan Johnson's prior ill-fated consolidation bill up mainly to demonstrate that Connecticut is a very diverse state economically and otherwise, and what is necessary to change in one or more parts of the state, may be left alone in another.

I support the three bills addressed to finally doing something positively to fix the diseconomies of scale and inefficiencies of our antiquated, fragmented and racially and economically segregated State school district structure. But it must be done with great care not to make the same changes everywhere in our State for the sake of making change or of treating different situations alike.

For example, I see no need for change in lower Fairfield County. But I do, however, strongly urge consolidations and new approaches to say the least in the areas of the seven urban centers I have talked about, and also among the smaller rural, less economically advantaged towns of Northeast Connecticut, east of Willimantic.

Again, I conceptually support all three of these bills, I laud their sponsors and this committee for bringing them forth today and I am confident that the committee and this legislature has the good sense, courage and capability to fine tune them to fit the very special and diverse needs of all of the towns and people of our great State for the ultimate benefit of us all. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,
/s/Dennis O'Brien
Attorney Dennis O'Brien