

February 28, 2019

Subject: SB 457, 738 and 874

To the members of the Committee and our elected officials of the state of Connecticut,

I am writing to urge you to vote no to further advancement of SB 457, 738 and 874.

These proposed bills have the potential to dismantle the foundation that our town, Wilton, and many others in Connecticut are built upon and the primary reason people choose to live in Connecticut, our locally controlled and exceptional public schools.

I am a lifelong resident of Connecticut. I am forty one years old with four children ages four, nine, eleven and thirteen. My three oldest children attend public school in Wilton with the youngest about to enter in Fall of 2019. Needless to say, these proposals are important to our family and our future in Connecticut.

My wife and I are both products of Wilton public schools. I work as a professional in New York City. I commute from Wilton every day, remarkably nearly four hours round trip five days per week on trains that are new, but somehow slower than the old, for one simple and singular reason - we love the Wilton public schools and the community around them they support.

My wife is now a stay at home mother caring for our children, but has a masters in Education from Sacred Heart University and is a certified elementary school teacher. She taught in numerous local towns in Connecticut. Like most every teacher I have met in our town and beyond, she became a teacher to help educate children with all her heart and soul, not for a pension.

Our parents, both sets, moved to Connecticut at a time when the state was growing quickly, was known to be very business and resident friendly, a state with amazing public schools and providing an affordable cost of living in communities that were close knit. For these reasons Connecticut was a fantastic place to raise a family. Now, economic growth remains in steady, and maybe accelerating decline, taxes are on the rise at every level and comparably among the highest in the country, and our public schools, which have been forced to do more with less from the state each year, are under attack, specifically by these bills, threatening the very fabric of our close knit communities.

Our schools in Wilton and surrounding towns are very efficient. They hold themselves to the highest standards with respect to quality of education and fiscal responsibility. Wilton's Board of Education and Board of Finance work diligently each year to deliver an acclaimed public education system on a balanced budget. They do this with effectively no state funding. They already work hard to identify and utilize shared services wherever advantageous and possible without compromising quality or accessibility of education or service. They do this

autonomously and because it is responsible, not because it is mandated or forced. Force, penalties and coercion never yield best outcomes for any constituent. We do not need state appointed committees to help us make the decisions we have already proven we can make.

SB 738, 457 and 874 are vague, provide no evidence for or even references to improved educational outcomes (the only measurement that should matter), no evidence of justifiable or clear cost savings that would be sufficient to offset acceleration of flight of long time, high contributing residents to other states, and the very real potential of destroying the glue that holds communities all over the state together, our locally controlled, high quality public schools. Further, push down of pension obligations and upstreaming of local tax revenue have potential to strip the town of its own fairly earned and well managed financial resources with no tangible benefit offered in return.

One factor often cited as a reason for forced regionalization is inefficient schools and excessive expenditures “outside the classroom” for those with smaller and declining populations. The measure of this is largely a per pupil calculation. The state’s failure to support and grow a healthy economy in both major cities and surrounding towns for its residents has resulted in persistent drain of companies and jobs from the state. This has led to a reduction in workforce and reduction in population as residents have been forced to seek jobs elsewhere. Not surprisingly as people leave the state, so do their children, the pupils. When you keep the numerator the same (fixed costs, ie unions, pensions, facilities and utilities) and decrease the denominator (pupils) the ratio of cost per pupil rises. The local school districts and especially not the highly efficient and well run districts like Wilton did not cause this problem and should not be penalized for success as measured by educational outcomes and fiscal responsibility, especially when achieved in times of declining state support. Rather than trying to calibrate the numerator which is already optimized annually and responsibly in towns like Wilton and other high performing communities, the state should be seeking to constructively grow the denominator (pupils) to drive a positive and sustainable growth in our state economy.

Our elected officials need to refocus their time and energy on revival of Connecticut’s economy, including a plan for encouraging and supporting local businesses, expanding our talent pool through stronger schools at every level, and attracting back major corporations who can support a future vision for a Connecticut that will attract new residents. Dismantling the best asset we have to fund the missteps of the past is not a viable solution, it fully admits defeat and acknowledges that growth similar to what is occurring in many states around us and the country is not achievable here. That attitude must change if Connecticut is to return to health and prosperity.

For these reasons and more, I urge you to vote no to advancing bills 738, 457 and 874.

Jason Partenza
Wilton, CT