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Testimony of

Orlando J. Rodriguez

Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

March 1st, 2019

Re:

**SB 457 AAC THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS
SB 738 AAC THE CREATION OF REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS
SB 874 AAC EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT
(Secs. 2 and 7 of SB 874 addressing shared services and regionalization)**

Good afternoon, Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Orlando Rodriguez. I serve as the Research and Policy Development Specialist for the Connecticut Education Association, which is the largest teachers' union in Connecticut representing tens of thousands of active and retired teachers who inform our legislative priorities.

CEA supports proposals that can cost-effectively produce better educational outcomes. However, we are concerned that proposals on the agenda today (SB 457, SB 738, and SB 874) could result in the involuntary closing of Connecticut schools, especially elementary schools that are close to home in smaller communities. We are concerned that redistricting or consolidating schools in way that could result in closing schools and increasing class sizes, could negatively impact children, classrooms, teachers, and learning outcomes.

CEA members want to ensure that any proposals to share services protect or enhance the quality of education and ensure that educators, parents, and local leaders have a say in decisions that could impact students and their school districts. We commend the governor for including in SB 874, an approach that looks at a broad scope of issues related to sharing services, while we also seek to ensure that the end goal is not to force schools or districts to regionalize, consolidate, or close schools. Additionally, we do not support section 7, which by creating a regional board of finance, unnecessarily adds an additional layer of government.

It may be assumed that regionalization will reduce costs through economies of scale. On the surface, this is a logical viewpoint but it ignores the importance of having high educational achievement. When you consider costs, you must also consider educational outcomes. There can be grave long-term social consequences to a cost-only perspective.

A recent article in the Hartford Business Journal written by a former member of the Simsbury Board of Education states “... regionalization reduces service levels to local taxpayers and, over time, simply increases the overall size and cost of government.”ⁱ A report from the New Jersey Assembly Task Force on School District Regionalization came to a similar conclusion: “Sharing administrative services doesn’t necessarily cut costs, because as personnel begin to take on region-wide responsibilities, it often becomes necessary to hire more staff to support them.”ⁱⁱ

In Maine, the state legislature forced all school districts to regionalize as a way of reducing costs.ⁱⁱⁱ It was a massive mistake. Small towns feared losing local control over finances and education quality. Maine has now given up on forced regionalization and many of the districts that were forced to regionalize have since disbanded.

The new superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District proposed splitting into 32 smaller “neighborhood networks” with the goal of reducing costs, engaging parents, and improving educational achievement.^{iv} Separately, A 2010 empirical study of rural regionalization in Connecticut stated “...[S]chool leaders in Connecticut and across the country may need to reexamine the assumptions of school consolidation and consider the possibility that small may be the new big.”^v My analysis for the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving found that, in Connecticut, the district most likely to be cost-effective and foster educational achievement has a student population from 2,500 to 3,000.^{vi} Ellington Public Schools is a good example. For those districts that are smaller, legislators must consider their unique benefits and appeal – local control, elementary children located close to home, in a school familiar to the community, and the greater likelihood of parental involvement.

Half of business mergers fail and there is no reason to expect that public-sector mergers such as K-12 regionalization will have better outcomes. It is too early to enact the regionalization criteria in SB 457 and SB 738; instead, specifics regarding regionalization should wait until the completion of various reports that could come from SB 874, if it is revised, to focus on what’s best for teaching and learning.

CEA looks forward to working with stakeholders to create a well-informed policy for K-12 regionalization in Connecticut.

We thank you for your time and interest.

Endnotes

ⁱ Goman, R. M. (2019, February 11). Regional government: A solution in search of a problem. Hartford Business.com. Retrieved February 26, 2019, from <http://www.hartfordbusiness.com/article/20190211/PRINTEDITION/302089968/regional-government-a-solution-in-search-of-a-problem>

ⁱⁱ Malone, J., & Blee, F. (1999). Assembly Task Force on School District Regionalization. New Jersey State Legislature. Retrieved February 26, 2019, from <https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/legislativepub/reports/school.pdf>

^{iv} Romero, Esmeralda Fabián. 2018. "LAUSD chief Austin Beutner wants to bring local control, family involvement to schools." Los Angeles Daily News. November 13. Accessed January 8, 2019. <https://www.dailynews.com/2018/11/13/lausd-chief-austin-beutner-wants-to-bring-local-control-family-involvement-to-schools/>

^v Cullen, Joseph Patrick. "A comparison of the academic performance of college bound high school students in regional vs. community high schools in Connecticut." Current Issues in Education 13.2 (2010).

^{vi} Rodriguez, O. J. (2018). K-12 Regionalization in Connecticut: Pros, Cons and Surprises. Hartford: The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. Retrieved January 7, 2019, from <http://www.hfpg.org/index.php/latest-updates/updates/hartford-foundation-sponsors-report-k-12-school-district-regionalization1>