

Dear Members of the Education Committee

I am writing this letter to voice my strong opposition to SB 738, SB457, SB 874 and any other legislation that opens the door to the forced regionalization of Connecticut school districts. Let me make myself clear: forced regionalization includes any form of legislation that coerces districts by holding substantial amounts of state funding captive unless districts capitulate even when it may not be in their best interest to do so. This opinion has been shaped by my personal experience as both a mother and an educator of 19 years, as well as extensive research on the issue. The bottom line is that while these three bills cite increased school efficiency as their goal, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that school regionalization actually leads to cost savings or increased educational outcomes. In truth, much evidence suggests that the opposite is true. Even more disturbing, regionalization has been found to negatively impact student achievement, decrease extracurricular opportunities, diminish a student's sense of connection, decrease property values, increase poverty rates, and lead to an overall sense of social disintegration in affected communities.

First, the claim that regionalization will lead to cost efficiency does not bear out. Multiple studies done in Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts and, more significantly, in Connecticut by the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving, have found that regionalization can result in diseconomies of scale due to higher transportation costs, the creation of additional mid-level administrators and their related support staff, and empty school buildings with no interested buyers. These empty school buildings further serve to drive property values down and can lead to blighted neighborhoods. There are larger, more far reaching economic consequences as well. Schools are often one of the largest employers in a town and the people who work in a school whether they be teachers, custodians, cafeteria workers, or paraprofessionals tend to live locally. Regionalization will surely lead to a loss of jobs, a burden that will negatively influence the local economy. How do you tell the third year teacher in my district who just spent over \$30,000 earning a Master's Degree that is mandated by the state that his job may be lost to consolidation? A study conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston found that cost savings can result not only from regionalization but "also from breaking up very large schools." Indeed, a Michigan study projected that consolidation would save a projected 31 million annually while deconsolidation would save \$363 million annually. Additionally, the suggestion that smaller districts are somehow sapping dry educational funds provided by the state at the expense of larger districts is absolute farce. The Hartford Foundation study cited that the optimal enrollment range for optimal cost efficiency in a school district was 750-5,000 students. It further found that every Connecticut school district with enrollments of 2,500-3,000 spent less than the state average. That is certainly true of where I teach, which is a smaller, solidly, middle class town in DRG F. We are at the near bottom in per pupil spending. Our local BOE works with administrators and teachers, whom they know and trust, to carefully and wisely spend the funds given by the state and local taxpayers. We translate that into student achievement rates that are top in our DRG and higher than many schools in more affluent DRGs. It is simple common sense that focusing on lowering the average per pupil spending in smaller districts nets an overall lower gain than focusing on lowering per pupil costs in larger districts. You are talking about a small, overall net savings at the risk of tearing apart successful school district while at the same time disrupting the social fabric and economic viability of communities.

Regionalization and consolidation can also have negative impacts on student learning outcomes. Various studies have cited decreased parent participation in the educational process, and increased student apathy and absenteeism after consolidation. The Hartford Foundation Study found that in terms of increasing student achievement, the optimal range was 260-2,925 students. Disadvantaged students in particular have been found to benefit from smaller, not larger schools. As both a parent and a teacher, I have sought out a smaller school district experience. I began my career in a large, wealthy suburb in a high school of over 2,500 students. While that school had many wonderful attributes, the large size was a negative. While known and supported by my department, outside of it, I was just a face and name, not a person with agency or impact. My students often did not know each other and cliques were pervasive. I made the move to teach in my hometown, which, while in a less affluent community, was smaller and more personable. My voice is heard in a way it could never have been in my former district. Every teacher is known by district administrators and BOE members. Teachers know every student. Class sizes are smaller, allowing for differentiation and more personalized instruction. Teachers know each other and can more effectively collaborate. Students are less likely to fall through the cracks. As a teacher I worry that consolidation will lead to larger class sizes, and more administrative burdens bring

placed on teachers, drawing precious time away from classroom preparation. I worry about disconnected students and disconnected, overburdened teachers.

As a parent and taxpayer I also have deep concerns. There are not many reasons keeping people, especially young educated professionals, in Connecticut. Family connections, community connections, and excellent school systems are the most oft cited reasons. That is very true in my town. The quality of education is the number one reason why people move there and those raised here chose to return after college. Forced regionalization will result in lowered property values and will minimize the primary push factor that makes our community attractive to buyers. State wide, the real estate market will atrophy in the face of several years of uncertainty regarding the final outcome of the redistricting. I worry about the eroding quality of education my children will experience as well as decreased opportunities for sports, theater, and other extracurricular activities. My high school aged daughter, who has always dreamed of becoming a teacher, is now re-evaluating those plans in the face of this uncertainty. How many other bright, individuals are wondering the same? New England has a proud traditional of local control. I worry about the erosion of that tradition. It is disconcerting to think that a commission of non-elected officials could trigger a plan of regionalization without proper local involvement. Rather than implementing regionalization through force and decree, why not place the emphasis on fully studying the issue and cutting the red tape and process involved in allowing innovation school partnerships. That way districts can make informed decisions to either enter partnership or not enter partnerships based on their unique needs. This sudden push to regionalize seems hasty, and ill-informed, and ominously cloak and dagger as it was not a significant issue this campaign season. If you erode local control and take away our school systems, which are the very heart and souls of our communities, you take away one of the last reasons to stay in this state.

In closing, there seems to be very little concrete gain by pursuing forced regionalization of school districts. Instead, the risks for devastating economic, social, and educational impacts are high. Vermont passed similar legislation which has led to multiple lawsuits, confusion, paralyzed budgetary processes, and the erosion of communities. Currently six states including Florida and Pennsylvania are examining the feasibility and impact of deconsolidating districts. As a mother and an educator, I urge you to vote no to SB 738, SB457, SB 874 .

Sincerely,

Michelle Thies