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RE: Testimony in Opposition to SB 738, SB 457 and Governor's Bill 874

Dear Education Committee members,

As a registered Democrat and 22 year resident of Connecticut, I strongly oppose SB 738, SB 457 and Governor's Bill 874 (hereinafter referred to solely by number), as well as any other bills proposed this session, or thereafter, proposing the forced regionalization/consolidation/redistricting* of schools. While I freely acknowledge that vast educational inequities exist between school districts in Connecticut and that Connecticut is in the midst of an almost unprecedented fiscal crisis, none of these proposed bills will solve those issues, and numerous issues exist with all three proposed bills.

First, the stated purposes for all three bills are couched in budgetary terms and frame school consolidation as a way to create a more efficient educational system and realize cost savings. However, there is no empirical evidence showing that the regionalization required by these bills will create long term, significant cost efficiencies. In fact, research shows quite the opposite. Studies have concluded that cost savings are greatest when merging two smaller districts of approximately 300 students, but as the districts involved become larger, the cost savings decrease. As the consolidating districts reach 1500 students or more, consolidation has little impact on efficiency. Diseconomies of scale may occur even with mergers of small districts. Transportation costs rise due to longer bus routes, labor costs rise because of "leveling up" associated with seniority and new collective bargaining agreements, and often more mid-level administrators and support staff are necessary. Studies have found that the "sweet spot" for achieving high quality education at optimal cost efficiency is in districts ranging from 1,000 students to no more than 4,000. (It is also worth noting that for high-risk districts, research concludes enrollment in elementary schools should not exceed 300 and high schools should not exceed 500.) In Connecticut, most school districts already fall within this "sweet spot" for efficiency; consolidations will result in many districts exceeding recommended district size guidelines. For instance, my home district of Wilton currently serves approximately 4,000 students, placing the district comfortably within the recommended guidelines. Consolidation with our probate partner Norwalk, with approximately 11,500 students, would place the consolidated district way beyond the bounds of the "sweet spot" for district size.

Second, there is a glaring omission in all three bills-provisions regarding education quality. All Connecticut residents have an interest in maintaining a high quality educational system that prepares all students for a lifetime as contributing members of our society. I am always open to discussions regarding plans to remedy the inequities in educational opportunities across districts, however, these

regionalization bills do not address quality at all and certainly do not argue their purpose is to provide increased access or opportunity for students in low performing districts. In fact, all three proposed bills run the risk of eroding the quality of high performing districts, while not substantially raising the quality of low-performing districts. Numerous studies conclude the disadvantages and negative impacts of regionalization include lower student achievement, administrators who cannot address important student issues because the student to administrator ratio is too high, a lower rate of family and community participation, decreased participation in extracurricular activities higher drop out rates, decreased enrollment in postsecondary institutions and an increase in violent acts committed at school. At risk students in rural and city districts, face the highest risk of suffering negative impacts when districts consolidate. In many rural districts, the schools are the heart of the community and when districts combine the combined districts lose their sense of community. The potential for achieving high educational outcomes for at-risk students is diminished when they attend large schools disconnected from their own communities. The decreased participation in extracurricular activities is significant as participation in sports, clubs, band, etc. correlates with higher graduation rates.

Third, the proposed bills usurp the historical independent control exercised by local boards of education, boards of selectmen, and boards of finance (or the equivalent), replace municipal autonomy with overreaching, unwarranted statewide decision-making. In fact, the concept of FORCED regionalization arguably runs afoul of the concept of home rule provided for in Article 10 of the Constitution of the State of Connecticut. While Boards of Education are creatures of the state, other town governance boards that control the budgets for each town are not. Forced regionalization takes control of the purse out of the hands of town/city officials and their residents, and places it in the hands of the state. Arguably this conflicts with the State Constitution and historical precedent. Convening a Commission on Shared School Services, under 874, to study and share findings regarding possible consolidation, regionalization or redistricting does not compromise traditional home rule, however, requiring municipalities to implement these recommendations may well do so. Reports could be a valuable resource for some municipalities, but decision regarding whether, and how, to implement any of recommendations should be voluntary and left to local decision makers who know what is best for their individual communities. The Governor's Bill, as written, is unclear regarding whether consolidation of services or regionalization or redistricting will be optional or forced. Interpretative concerns are raised by, but not limited to, the following sections of the bill:

1. Section 1.(a) and Section 2.(a) concerning the stated purpose of redistricting and consolidating school services and school districts.
2. Section 2.(b)(8) to (11) concerning negotiation of labor contracts, transportation service contracts, athletic schedules and school hours, and after school programs;
3. Section 4. (b) (1) (B) (ii) concerning municipality implementation of shared and consolidated services.

It must also be noted that the timelines provided in 874 Sections 1 through 4 appear confusing and unrealistic. For instance, the proposed Commission's comprehensive report containing preliminary recommendations is due on December 1, 2020 (Section 2 (b) (17)), but the municipalities are required to submit their reports regarding shared services/consolidation and their schedule for implementation on January 1, 2020 (Section 4. (b)(1)). Shouldn't municipality reports be due AFTER the Commission's preliminary report?

Fourth, building on the theme of overreach and usurping local power, these bills discount the fact that individual communities already voluntarily, and quite successfully, participate in cost sharing and cost saving arrangements. Wilton, for example, is working on a shared solar field installment with Weston, participates in regional worker's compensation insurance plans and participates in regional public safety programs. Wilton also participates in the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG), which enables joint purchase discounts, and also serves as a forum for studying additional regional cost saving opportunities. Town officials currently are actively investigating ways to share services to reduce recycling costs, and contain ever rising medical costs. Wilton also shares an extensive list of services between our own Board of Selectmen and Board of Education.** These bills penalize towns and cities, such as Wilton, who have exercised fiscal responsibility, and at the cost of providing other amenities, have created and supported high quality schools.

The Governor's Bill also addresses topics beyond consolidation of services and speaks to such topics as curriculum. While this may seem like minutia in the context of the entire bill, of particular interest to me is Section 17 (concerning duties of parents and educational instruction of children in their care). While this section requires parents to “. . .instruct them [children in their care] or cause them to be instructed in reading, writing, spelling, English grammar, geography, arithmetic and United States history and in citizenship. . .” there is a notable omission-science. In a time when environmental issues, including climate change, have been identified as amongst the world's top security threats, it seems science should be added to that comprehensive list.

Connecticut is already struggling to attract new business and new families to the state. These regionalization bills will erode the quality of education in Connecticut impeding any and all efforts to rebuild our economy, revitalize our cities and attract business, young people and families to the state. Solutions to the state's fiscal crisis should not come at the cost of quality education for all students in Connecticut, nor should the autonomy of municipalities who have exercised fiscal prudence be stripped in order to remedy decades of mismanagement at the state level. I urge you to oppose SB 738, SB 457 and Governor's Bill 874, as well as any other legislation that mandates forced consolidation or regionalization of Connecticut schools.

Sincerely yours,

Heather L. Wilcauskas

*For the purposes of this testimony, consider these words to be interchangeable and that I oppose any forced regionalization, redistricting or consolidation of schools or services.

**Shared services include, but are not limited to, the following: CFO, Facilities Director, Police School Resource officers, pension administrative services, town finance staff, town provided school nurses, Parks and Rec management of sports fields and facilities, solar installations, medical claims administration, electricity agreements.

Resources

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