

Hello CT representatives,

I'd like to voice my concern regarding several bills currently under consideration by the CT legislature regarding school consolidation or regionalization.

First off, I want to say that I am 100% in favor of wealthier towns like mine, New Canaan, helping to shore up the educational experiences of all students in CT. I think the fact that we have such wide discrepancies between schools in New Canaan and other cities in CT is a travesty, and something must be done to increase the diversity -- both economic and demographic -- in our schools. We must do something to equalize the educational opportunities offered to students across CT.

However, I have personal experience with large school districts in other states that serve as a cautionary tale, a warning against the regionalization tactic to achieve those goals.

I moved to CT 3 and 1/2 years ago, and in large part it was to give my two special needs (Autistic) children a better school experience. We lived in California, and found their regional approach to services for students like my boys an absolute nightmare.

To save costs and create efficiencies, the San Mateo/Foster City school district provides regionalized services for special needs kids -- so, a set of counselors and therapists and psychologists work for the school district, not individual schools. They are stationed around at various schools in the district, depending on space and resourcing and also in some part on the student needs at particular schools. This makes sense on paper -- pool the resources to serve a wider group of students, and in theory, you save money and create consistency for all students in the district when it comes to those services.

The reality is much different. My youngest son ended up going to 3 different schools in 3 years, because he was always placed where most of his services would be provided, and his needs and the location of the therapists always seemed to be in flux. This in itself was a problem. Think about how tough it is to be the new kid in school. Now imagine that you have trouble making friends because of the way your brain works. After a year, you finally make some friends -- only to be separated from those friends the very next year, because you are all stationed at different schools. Imagine having to start all over every single year. That would be tough for any kid, but it's even worse when the kid struggles to make friends.

Next, is the logistical reality -- a kid who needs speech therapy might also need occupational therapy. But the school in which he's placed doesn't offer occupational therapy on site. So, how do you get him to his OT? Either the parent must pick the child up in the middle of the day and take them, or the school must either transport the child or therapist to other schools. This is a logistical waste of money and time, and creates confusion and chaos. I know because I lived it. And where I lived there were highways between all the schools, they could be reached within 10-15

minutes. Here? I can't even imagine the waste of time and resource it would take driving around between the schools in weather on country roads.

Third, it breaks down the community structure. As a special needs parent, the local school PTA where my child went for that year didn't care about my kids. Those kids are served by the district, in their minds, and so the school didn't have to think about them on its own. Parents don't have a voice in the local school, especially in my case when the parent has had to start over at 3 different schools with 3 different PTAs. Communities are about building relationships, and you can't do that if you're a scholastic nomad.

I tried to start a special education PTA, at the district level. That was a nightmare, and really exposed me to the true bureaucratic nightmare that the regionalized solution introduces. We tried to navigate the red tape of district vs school jurisdiction in order to make positive change for our kids, and it was impossible to get anyone to take "ownership" of an issue. The bureaucracy created a situation where there was always someone to pass the buck to. Don't get me started on the number of times people didn't feel an issue was their problem because "those kids are funded by the district." Not to mention, when you get a group of parents together across grades, schools, and challenges -- it's hard to decide what the priorities should be. Should it be about transitioning kids with severe disabilities to Middle School? Should it be about mainstreaming kids who are less severe on the spectrum? Who can decide when you have such a diverse constituency. Your voice is fractured and fragmented by design.

Regionalization of school services does not work. What I think could work? Affordable Housing in towns. If we want our schools to be reflective of our community, but more diverse, then our communities should be more diverse -- and that means having more different people able to live in different places across the state. Let's get more affordable housing in New Canaan.

Also, more funding. The horrible fight over these bills has pit community over community, fighting over getting a bigger, better piece of the pie. We don't need to figure out how to slice the pie fairly. We need more pie. What are other non-traditional funding sources for schools? Lottery, legalized sports betting, legalization of marijuana -- I want to see our legislature think out of the box and figure out how to get more money for our schools. I'm willing to pay more in taxes to do it. Let's really fund our kids. **ALL OUR KIDS.**

I do support Sen Duff's proposal about administrative regionalization for small schools/towns. That makes economic sense and doesn't sound like it would adversely impact kids.

I hope you will forgive my long message, and hope you will carefully consider my points.

Thanks,

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