

Charles Bender Written Testimony

Wilton, CT

Thank you to the Education Committee Chairman McCrory, Chairman Sanchez and members of the Education Committee for holding this public hearing.

I am here today to express my opposition to the forced regionalization of public schools in Connecticut, as outlined (either directly or insinuated) in the proposed bills SB 738, SB 457 and SB 874, and my opposition to the forced push down of state liabilities to local municipalities as outlined in HB 7150. And I am speaking to you today not as a Democrat, not as a Republican, but as a father of two young children and as a parent of public school students from a small school district.

I moved to Wilton in 2015 and one of the top reasons for moving to the area was its highly regarded school district. I have also participated in the town's annual meeting and review of the town budget, a large share of which is funding for the school district. Having this kind of interaction within the town gives its citizens a sense of pride and belonging to a community, helping all to thrive within it.

Taking this away and merging with another district will erode this enthusiasm and likely have a negative impact for all. Allowing the reallocation of tax dollars by Hartford is risky, in my opinion, given the tendencies of elected officials to raid the General Transportation Fund over the years, for example (so much so that voters recently approved to lock box the General Transportation Fund). Or as another example, underfunding pensions in the short term over countless years instead of looking out for the future of the state.

How are we suppose to trust people tens or hundreds of miles away from the district when they can't even manage what already is under their control currently? How are the people of the state suppose to trust this to-be-established commission when it will be likely hand picked by and for people that are in support of these bills, and thus likely come to the conclusion that forced regionalization will work for Connecticut? How are citizens suppose to support even a partial school regionalization with bills that are so open ended that can be changed on a whim after these studies are completed?

Unfortunately, not once have I heard from members of this committee that the intention of any of these bills is to promote better educational opportunities for the students of this state. Instead, we are led to believe that this is just to weed out a few superintendents here and there, and/or other back office services. I respect the need the to look into ways the state can save money. However, in reading SB 874, it calls for various studies that go well beyond these administrative or back office functions, including looking at school property locations and utilization, school transportation, and athletics.

My concern is that by allowing these proposals to move forward, you are handcuffing towns for the next 12-24 months to properly plan for its future, without knowing what

the government will conclude. And some of the early incentives to promote consolidation sound much more like sticks than carrots, to use Governor Lamont's words, with threats of cutting funding if they don't conform, which communities would then have to consider raising real estate taxes to make up the difference, or cut services in town, again impacting the middle class that so many lawmakers claim they want to protect.

These bills have brought on tremendous stress within many communities around the state that will continue, as people are unsure if they should get out before the committee's work is done, or hope that wiser minds will prevail. My family has already had these discussions, discussions that were never even close to mind at the beginning of the year.

These Swiss cheese talking points of lawmakers that have been crafted since the Looney Bill was first introduced are cute in their attempt to not call this forced regionalization or closing down of schools. But as the Budget Director Melissa McCaw recently said, Forced Regionalization is still on the table. And it shouldn't be a surprise that all of this work needs to be done before the next general election, the first chance the people of the state can react with their votes.

Governor Lamont can claim he is keeping to his campaign promise in not raising income taxes on the middle class, but by taxing many of the goods the middle class buys on a regular basis, he is essentially doing just that. Instead of cutting costs, Governor Lamont figures he should just raise taxes, max out tolls (which I wouldn't be surprised if lawmakers somehow get a free E-Z Pass for themselves), and push the problems of Hartford politics and government mismanagement to the municipalities. Which is like if your parents max out their credit cards and then ask their kids, who had no say on why the purchases were made, to pay off the bill.

To that point, how about we address the elephant in the room - pensions. Governor Lamont wants bold ideas but since lawmakers are afraid to speak up since their only goal seems to be how to get re-elected and not focus on the betterment of the state, I'll suggest some. Why don't we eliminate the early retirement option at 55? Why don't we increase the contribution rate people pay? Why not increase base wages for state employees, set up a 401K match and close go forward pension recipients? Or maybe lawmakers should have their pensions reduced or eliminated until they balance the budget appropriately.

And if you have pre-judged me at this point that I'm some rich white kid, let me give you a quick background. I was the oldest of three, from a broken family, where my mother found a small community that had great public schools. I got a job as soon as I could to support my family and help put food on the table. I am thankful to have attended a great college, with the skills developed at the small public school system I attended, but never had the savings for it. My wife and I have worked our tails off to pay down our student debt, buy a home in a fantastic community, and with what little we have left, to save for our future. We have worked very hard to support our family,

and really stretched to move to Wilton because I knew it would have a positive impact for the development of my children. I have watched as Hartford has consistently reduced its state funding into our school district, only to be offset by its tax paying citizens, sometimes by making hard decisions on other school projects or town initiatives.

I hope you will oppose SB 738, SB 457, SB 874, HB 7150 and any other legislation that opens the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut public schools. Let's stop playing politics with our school districts. Focus on the bigger issues that the state requires this committee to do instead of an item on a certain wing of the government's political agenda. And for once, look beyond party lines, and see the long term damage these bills will have on the local municipalities, which will only further send this state in a downward spiral it won't be able to climb out of. Keep your hands off our schools. Thank you.