

TESTIMONY from John Bestor
Public Hearing March 1, 2019
Education Committee

IN OPPOSITION TO S.B. 874: An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut

IN OPPOSITION TO S.B. 738: An Act Concerning the Creation of Regional School Districts

IN OPPOSITION TO S.B. 457: An Act Concerning the Size of School Districts

As a parent of two graduates of CT public schools and a grandparent of two grandchildren enrolled in CT public schools and also as a retired school psychologist who worked over forty years in a CT public school district, I am **steadfastly opposed** to these three legislative bills that have been written to further promote school regionalization in our State.

Passage of these bills **will undermine the basic tenets, principles, and precedents of public education** that established that public schools within a community are monitored, regulated, and overseen by locally-elected boards of education.

Passage of these bills will DAMAGE EDUCATION QUALITY. There is no evidence that suggests that education quality will be maintained as school districts are regionalized into larger entities. According to the 2017 Hartford Foundation for Public Giving's extensive literature review entitled "K-12 Regionalization in Connecticut: Pros, Cons and Surprises", **"there is sparse evidence that large school districts produce better education outcomes and more evidence that large districts are generally detrimental to education outcomes."** (p.9)

The HFPG study cited evidence from a 2011 Indiana study that **"as enrollment increased, student achievement decreased"** (p.11)

"The literature suggests that in order to foster high education outcomes, elementary schools should not exceed an enrollment of 500 except for those serving disadvantaged students, which should have maximum enrollment of 300." (p.12)

"Research also suggests that impoverished regions in particular often benefit from small schools and districts, and can suffer irreversible damage if consolidation occurs." (p.12)

Passage of these bills will have a NEGATIVE IMPACT ON STUDENT, PARENT, AND TEACHER ENGAGEMENT. There is also evidence suggesting that larger school districts negatively impact student and parent engagement and relationships with teachers. The HFPG report indicates that larger districts lead to **increased apathy: "less student and parent engagement in larger enrollment districts"** (p.6)

"Smaller school size affects education achievement by creating more parental involvement and positive student-teacher relationships." (p.10)

Passage of these bills offers only A PROMISE OF COST-SAVINGS. However, that promise of projected cost-savings has never been substantiated. In fact, there is a great deal of doubt that

short-term savings will be long-lasting. A 2017 study by the National Education Policy Center concluded that benefits from school district consolidation are **“vastly overestimated”**. A 2006 New Jersey study cited in the HFPG literature review indicated that **“sharing administrative services doesn’t necessarily cut costs”**. (p.4)

The National Conference on State Legislatures in School and District Consolidation wrote in 2017: **“Larger districts can also tend to have higher administrative costs....This report found that as administrators begin to take on region-wide responsibilities, it often becomes necessary to hire more staff to support the regional positions. This creates new levels of administration. Additionally, the new regional responsibilities may result in a need for higher compensation for regional administrators to avoid a decrease in job performance.”**

An earlier 2002 study reported in the Journal of Education Finance summarized many of the above-mentioned concerns suggesting that **“district consolidation may actually create negative impacts such as high transportation costs, a ‘leveling up’ of salaries, and more negative attitudes among staff members and parents.”**

In addition to these many concerns, I am particularly alarmed about inclusion of this Regionalization proposal in a much broader bill that encompasses much more than the highly controversial and widely unpopular issues associated with forced regionalization.

A careful reading of the first twelve-plus pages of the lengthy S.B. 874 reveals that the proposed Governor’s Commission on Shared Services is neither designed nor intended to evaluate the advantages and drawbacks of School District Regionalization, but rather to identify what is currently in place across the State and determine AN ACTION PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION. The Statement of Purpose attached to S.B. 874 clearly establishes that fact: **“To implement the Governor’s recommendation”**. No discussion. No investigation. No analysis. No vetting. No proof. Just do it by fiat!

As such, the first 366 lines of S.B. 874 should be removed from this bill. The issues are too far-reaching and consequential to be slipped into a broader bill. Those who have sponsored this bill should know better and must be prevented from colluding with the Governor in trying to socially engineer an over-simplified solution to the intransigent problems associated with poverty and the pronounced disparities in resourcing our public schools.

Respectfully,

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