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SB 738, SB 457 & SB 874 -- Education Committee Hearing Testimony 3/1/19

Mr. Chairman, members of the Education Committee, family, friends and fellow Connecticut residents, my name is Stephen Blinder and I stand before you today to testify against Senate Bill 738 and all bills proposing forced school regionalization. I consider myself qualified to speak on this issue as a Weston High School Class of 2018 graduate now taking a Gap Year before attending college this coming fall. I dream of one day returning to Connecticut and doing my part to ensure the next generation of deeply motivated change-makers is able to thrive in the State I love. I have a responsibility to be engaged here in Hartford because the stakes have never been higher and I know the future of our state will soon be in the hands of young folks such as myself. My generation must ensure even now that wise decisions are made. I'm 19 years old and I've seen our state suffer an enduring fiscal crisis, a school massacre in Newtown and a society more divided than ever. As I look around the room today, I see mothers and fathers, daughters and sons and family members concerned about what should be a sacred part of our community: education. My parents made the difficult financial decision to move early in my childhood despite the higher taxes because they desperately wanted my sister and me to have access to a world-class education that would set us up to have a better future than they had. Thanks to them, I know first-hand the feeling of walking into a school where I can form genuine student-teacher relationships, benefit from exceptional resources and most of all, a school that prepares me for a 21st Century world that has more opportunities but also more change than ever before.

While I want nothing more than to make decisions that will put money back into the system, forced regionalization shouldn't be a pillar upon which economic problems are solved. It is a blunt force that will have numerous unintended consequences. To think of it as purely a way to achieve administrative efficiencies is to imagine that so called "back office" is divorced from the teaching prowess and learning culture of schools. This subject is far too complex and fraught with risk to be subject to a forced policy. We should not have to sacrifice what is near and dear to us, that core rail of our society, education, in order to address financial problems that have been kicked down the road and fall on us. Mr. Chairman and members of the Education Committee, Senate Bill 738 is not the answer we need. It is not the answer upon which we can risk our future.

Over these past few weeks, I've often considered how we can help the state get out of debt while not sacrificing our quality of education. As Senator Haskell often says, "It took us a while to get into this mess and it'll take a while to get us out of it." More than anything, it's going to take our elected officials making tough, rational, well considered decisions in order to reverse the financial and social problems that plague our state. Although I cannot support forced regionalization, I do support deeply considered regionalization on a case by case basis that has as its core action standard improvement of the quality of education. Efficiency that goes hand in hand with an improvement in education, not on average, but vs. the higher standard is a

good thing. Economic inequalities between several of Connecticut school systems certainly do exist. We must address this not by averaging, not by going down to the lowest common denominator and certainly not by ignoring. Let us address these very important realities by fully funding districts that cannot raise standards to the highest levels through their own means. Let us raise districts through voluntary incentives. Forced regionalization will not do it for the very reasons I have put forward – it is a blunt instrument for which the most likely unintended consequence is a shift to the average rather than what must be our goal; the raising of all standards and especially for those weighed down by economic inequality. We must unleash the creative and leadership talent in our State and not consign those in areas with economic difficulty to a road where the odds are stacked against them. Let every student have the opportunity to achieve more, much more than their parents. That is the American Dream. That should be the Connecticut Dream. Forced regionalization though well intentioned no doubt does not provide a path to that dream's fulfillment.

Although Senate Bills 457 and 874 are quite early in the legislation process, I'm hopeful they will contain proposals we can all support. After all, I believe we should support legislation that addresses our debt intelligently and doesn't sacrifice or even risk those aspects of our society that make Connecticut so great and will make Connecticut even greater. Forced regionalization has brought both sides of the political aisle together and if we can avoid partisan politics, then we should be able to unite around bills that while difficult, will begin the long trek towards getting our state out of its fiscal mess and raise all Education Districts to the highest standards. Thank you for your time and thank you for helping Connecticut.