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With regards to bills SB 738 (An Act Concerning The Creation Of Regional School Districts), introduced by Senator Looney; SB 457 (An Act Concerning The Size Of School Districts), introduced by Senators Duff and Ostenand; and SB 874 (An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut), introduced by Senators Looney, Duff, Aresimowicz, and Ritter, on behalf of Governor Lamont:

I am wholeheartedly opposed to all of these bills. Local oversight, administration, and funding assures that each of Connecticut's 169 municipalities can tailor the curriculum, staffing, and capital expenses of its district to its unique needs. Top-down, centralized oversight of large school districts has been shown to both increase costs and produce worse outcomes for students, the exact opposite of what the authors of these bills claim.

The issue has been studied extensively, and overall the results of regionalization have been found to be negative.

To quote the authors of a study in Colorado, *"while state-level consolidation proposals may serve a public relations purpose in times of crisis, they are unlikely to be a reliable way to obtain substantive fiscal or educational improvement"* In fact, the authors of this study go so far as to conclude: "As is evident in the above summary, findings based on available research suggest that decision makers should approach consolidation cautiously. Specifically, we recommend that policymakers:

- Closely question claims about presumed benefits of consolidation in their state. What reason is there to expect substantial improvements, given that current research suggests that savings for taxpayers, fiscal efficiencies, and curricular improvements are unlikely?
- Avoid statewide mandates for consolidation and steer clear of minimum sizes for schools and districts. These always prove arbitrary and often prove unworkable.
- Consider other measures to improve fiscal efficiency or educational services. Examples include cooperative purchasing agreements among districts, combined financial services, enhanced roles for Educational Service Agencies, state regulations that take account of the needs of small districts and schools, recruitment and retention of experienced teachers for low-wealth districts, distance learning options for advanced subjects in small rural schools, smaller class sizes for young students, and effective professional development programs.
- Investigate deconsolidation as a means of improving fiscal efficiency and improving learning outcomes." (1.)

Another study in Arkansas found that "in general, we find that consolidation has a positive, yet practically insignificant performance impact on students from consolidating (larger) districts and a small negative performance impact for students in (smaller) districts that merged with

consolidating districts. *School closure, a consolidation related phenomenon, is found to have a strong negative impact on affected students” (2.)*

A study in New Jersey found “Although consolidating or merging two or more districts is thought to save taxpayers money through the efficiencies that may be gained, the results of this study suggest that actual student performance in high schools from (large) K-12 districts were inferior to schools from (small) non-K-12 districts” (3.)

Even a study from an admittedly “progressive” think tank that had a more favorable opinion of school regionalization and consolidation grudgingly admits “*In most cases, however, it should be districts and schools, not states, making the ultimate decisions around consolidation and district redesign efforts.*” (4.)

These are but four examples of the voluminous body of work on the topic of school regionalization and consolidation. A sizeable percentage of these studies seem to indicate that regionalization of small school districts produces universally worse outcomes for students, without any cost savings to the taxpayer. This is an important point, so I will emphasize this: **OUTCOMES ARE GENERALLY WORSE FOR ALL STUDENTS. THIS INCLUDES STUDENTS IN THE LOWER-PERFORMING DISTRICTS THAT SENATORS LOONEY, DUFF, OSTENAND, AND ARESIMOWICZ ARE PURPORTEDLY TRYING TO “HELP”**. It’s not just my kids who will have worse outcomes. All kids in the regional districts will, in general, be predictively worse off.

As a parent of children attending public school in a high-performing, well supported district, I don’t think it’s a stretch to assume that the educational outcomes of my children will be anything but worse under a regionalization plan. Additionally, as a taxpayer in a well-managed town, I take a dim view of what seems like “raiding the resources” of smaller towns to “fatten the resources” of nearby cities, many of which spend far more per pupil, with decidedly mixed results. I apologize if that sounds selfish. But my kids are my number one focus here.

There may, in fact, be advantages to adjacent school districts forming associations to gain savings via purchasing power, for example in meal service, bus fleets, or sports equipment. Nearby towns and cities should certainly explore opportunities to allow children from nearby districts to take advantage of specific programs not offered at their home school; AP courses, special language immersion courses, etc. But such associations should be voluntary, and need to make sense from a budgetary, logistical, and cultural point of view. Already, many kids are being served by the state-run Open Choice program, which allows students from low-performing districts to attend school in a high-performing district nearby.

Besides producing worse outcomes for students, which should be a top priority for all parties to this debate, these bills by definition weaken every citizen’s individual voice. Most towns and cities in Connecticut have amazingly effective local governance. I attend Board of Finance and Board of Education meetings, located within my town hall, and sit in the audience, or across the table from board members (all volunteers from the public) and collaborate on issues concerning the school system, school budget, and town budget. We debate, even argue, for

great lengths of time, often over the smallest details, and compromise in an effective way for the good of our small town. Every one of my fellow small-town residents also enjoys this opportunity to participate in democracy. With the proposed “top-down” approach being pushed here, I will lose that voice. Decisions regarding budgets, curriculum, and allocation of resources will take place increasingly far away, made by the “political class” rather than the actual citizens affected. THIS IS THE OPPOSITE OF DEMOCRACY. It presumes a small group of people in Hartford know what is best for each and every resident in Connecticut. It’s actually quite an overreach of power and authority, and all residents of our state should be disturbed by this affront to democracy.

As a lifelong independent, who has happily voted on both sides of the aisle, I am outraged by the overtly autocratic nature of this proposal. I hope that all members of the legislature, whether Republican or Democrat, are likewise outraged and will vote against all of these bills.

Sincerely,
Harry Clark

Sources

- (1.) Consolidation Of Schools And Districts: What The Research Says And What It Means, Craig Howley, Jerry Johnson, and Jennifer Petrie; Ohio University February 2011; National Education Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, CO 80309-0249, Telephone: 303-735-5290 Fax: 303-492-7090 Email: NEPC@colorado.edu <http://nepc.colorado.edu>
- (2.) An Analysis of the Effect of Consolidation on Student Achievement: Evidence from Arkansas, Johnathan Mills, 208 Graduate Education Building, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville AR, 72701; Telephone:479-575-3172; Fax: 479-575-3196. E-mail: jnm003@uark.edu
- (3) The Educational Case Against School District Consolidation: a Study of School District Structure, Victor P. Hayek, Seton Hall University, Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs). 1887. <https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/1887>
- (4) Size Matters: A Look at School- District Consolidation, Ulrich Boser August 2013, Center For American Progress, 1333 H Street, NW, 10TH FLOOR, Washington, DC 20005 • TEL: 202-682-1611 • FAX: 202-682-1867 • www.americanprogress.org

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