

Testimony before the Education Committee In Opposition to Regionalizing Small School Districts

Submitted by Michelle Doucette Cunningham

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Governor's Bill No. 874 AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT.

Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, members of the Education Committee, my name is Michelle Doucette Cunningham and I am the Chair of the Willington Board of Education. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in opposition to the school regionalization bills before you.

While I applaud the Governor's intention to save funding and find greater efficiencies and economies of scale with this proposal, it is based on a number of false assumptions: that small towns can save money if they regionalize, that the work required only needs a part-time superintendent, and that a regional system would be more efficient.

Willington has 440 elementary and middle school students and uses a Region 19 for its high school students. We have two school buildings and are currently considering a construction project to combine all the grades into a single building because one of our buildings is more than 100 years old and needs substantial work.

Regionalization would cost us money

The Superintendent Board of Education considered regionalizing our schools about eight years ago, and because the other towns have a more generous teachers' contract and offer some expanded offerings (additional language classes) we would have to offer the same quality of education in every school in the district, and use the more generous teacher contract as a basis. This was found to be substantially more expensive than the savings from a combined district office.

A full-time superintendent in a small town wears many hats

In Willington, the Superintendent is also the District Grantwriter, Facilities Director, Contract Negotiator, District Curriculum Director and other roles as well. When hiring our current Superintendent, the Board of Education considered the impact of scaling back the position, but after we looked deeper into job responsibilities of the Superintendent in our town, we realized would actually save money by hiring only one full-time person who is willing and able to play these roles rather than hire additional support staff and consultants to do the work.

We do not have any Assistant Superintendents or Vice Principals in our district. But the amount of work doesn't decrease if small districts regionalize, so the cost savings of trading a full-time Superintendent in a stand-alone district for an Assistant Superintendent in a regional one would not save much money if any at all.

The majority of small towns are especially cost-sensitive and very efficient.

Willington's locally elected Board of Finance, Town Meeting and Budget Referendum process makes our town government and school board accountable to local voters in a way that regional boards of education could never be. Even with the addition of a regional board of finance, smaller towns are at the mercy of larger or wealthier towns with whom they might be grouped. Local decisions with local accountability will lead to the most efficient use of taxpayer dollars. Willington is ranked 143rd for per capita income, and out of necessity we have had to be extremely efficient with the funding we do have.

We are already regionalized

Willington, Ashford and Mansfield are part of Region 19 for secondary education. I believe that this provides a better quality of education for our students, although it does not save Willington money.

We do however save money by sharing services with our municipal government. Willington shares its entire business office between the school and the municipality, as well as fuel, electric, copier and computer support contracts, telephone service, as well as some facilities maintenance tasks such as plowing snow and mowing grass. We would welcome opportunities, but not requirements, to expand these shared services with either Willington town government or other districts, that would allow us to consider if the partnership were in the best interest of Willington.

Incentives are fine. Punishing us for a sound, responsible local decision is not.

I strongly support the use of incentives to promote regionalization **where it makes sense and is locally supported**. For example having the state cover the cost of a feasibility study to look at regionalizing schools is logical. But reducing state aid in the exact amount of the Superintendent's salary is punitive, and is a one-size fits all approach to a more complex issue.

I appreciate your intention of looking for cost savings and would welcome some limited back-office support, for example the state could negotiate a single state-wide license for Power School that so many districts use. While I speak before you today as an individual and do not represent the views of every board member in Willington, I look forward to continuing to work with you and other members of the legislature and the Governor's office to ensure our ability to provide a high quality public education for the children in Willington and throughout the state, while honoring the more tangible and intangible benefits of smaller locally-controlled schools.