

Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on SB 457, SB 738, and SB 874.

I am writing on behalf of my wife and I to express our strong opposition to SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874, as well as any other bill that calls for regionalization of Connecticut Public Schools.

When my wife, Dawn, and I were first married 10 years ago, we made the decision to settle in Connecticut, mainly because of the fantastic public schools. Our children's education is important to us. So, we chose the town of Wilton, despite high home prices, high taxes, high cost of living, and little in the way of jobs, culture, and amenities, specifically because of the #6-ranked Wilton Public Schools. We were both raised to be financially conservative, live within our means, and work hard for what we want, so we saved for years to afford a home in Wilton. But all we could afford was a run-down fixer-upper, so while each working full-time jobs, and while raising two young kids, we took on the house renovation ourselves, and made every penny and drop of sweat count. We lived through these stressful times, and made these concessions purposefully, because we trusted that our hard work would pay off, our home would appreciate in value, and the benefit of enrolling our kids in the highly-rated Wilton schools would be worth the struggle.

Forced regionalization of schools would destroy all of what we have worked for, and undermine the very reason why we choose to raise our family in Wilton. If districts are consolidated by region, then it is likely that our small #6-ranked Wilton schools would join the much larger and much lower #83-ranked Norwalk district. Regardless of the specific details and logistics of the merger, you must understand that the public perception is that this is bad for Wilton. And this perception – regardless of whether right or wrong – will have two very real impacts on Wilton residents: 1) The ranking of Wilton schools will drop, and the students and community will suffer. 2) The Wilton real estate market, which is propped up by the desirability of Wilton schools, will completely collapse. Why would anyone choose to pay a premium for a home in Wilton, just to have their children attend a regional Norwalk high school? In fact, many residents of Wilton have moved here from Norwalk, specifically to get out of Norwalk schools and in to Wilton schools. Therefore, all the families that purchased homes in Wilton, will be forced to stand by and watch our homes decline in value over night, while our children attend a school district that we feel is not meeting their academic needs and our expectations.

This example is by no means specific to just Wilton. Based on the proposed redistricting maps I have seen, similar scenarios will surely play out in comparably small, affluent towns with top schools such as Ridgefield, Farmington, Glastonbury, Woodbridge, etc. And from the intensely negative public reaction to this proposal, it seems as though most schools and communities across the state are against regionalization for many other reasons as well: problems with administrative logistics, problems with taxes and spending, problems with individualized student needs, etc. But from the perspective of a

young family in one of the most negatively impacted towns, this bill is a reason to seriously consider leaving Wilton, and possibly even Connecticut. Several young families like mine choose to live in Connecticut simply because of the schools. We choose specific towns in Connecticut because of the unique aspects and individualized services of that school district. Most of us didn't choose to live in Connecticut for our love of horrible traffic congestion, extremely high cost of living, and total lack of diverse, good paying jobs. We chose these towns and cities mainly because of the schools – for that is arguably one of the only benefits to living in this state right now, and is a unique and valuable commodity that truly sets Connecticut apart from the rest of the country. If these bills pass, it will just further drive people away from this state. If you truly want to stop the exodus of young professionals and hard-working families leaving Connecticut, then start right here.

Regionalization and consolidation of schools is not what is best for Connecticut. It will result in many more residents to leaving this state and will deter new residents from moving here. These bills will harm the schools, harm the towns and communities, harm the students, and harm the many, many families (like mine) that choose to live in this state and raise our children. My wife and I urge you to vote NO on any and all bills that call for forced regionalization and district consolidation.

Thank you again for hearing my testimony. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have, and sincerely hope that you will listen to the will of the people by voting NO on these poorly researched and hastily planned bills that will destroy Connecticut's greatest asset.

Sincerely,

Michael DiDonato
Wilton, CT