

TOWN OF DURHAM

OFFICE OF THE FIRST SELECTMAN

LAURA L. FRANCIS



**Testimony
Before the Education Committee
March 1, 2019**

RE: OPPOSE - SB-874, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in opposition to **SB- 874, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT**, which calls for the development of a plan for the “redistricting or consolidation of school services and districts” and penalize small school districts.

Many town leaders have been advised that the bill is aimed at facilitating a conversation about shared services and regional approaches. However, the bill as drafted calls for a plan to redistrict or consolidate services. Although we support efforts to assist towns in exploring voluntary shared services approaches, the bill needs to be revised to ensure that it does not result in a plan for forced consolidation.

A one-size-fits-all approach to consolidation/regionalizing schools: (1) does not guarantee any savings and may actually increase costs for many towns; (2) generally requires significant upfront costs; (3) undermines the quality and delivery of education for many students; (4) disrupts our communities; and (5) fails to address issues that are driving up education costs.

Section 5 of the bill requires a local board of education for a municipality with (1) a population of < 10,000, (2) one or two elementary schools, or (3) fewer than 2,000 resident students to use a chief executive officer of the board to supervise its schools or share superintendents. It is unclear whether this provision applies to regional school districts, but we are concerned that this language sets a dangerous precedent by imposing penalties – not incentives or assistance – to districts that do not share a superintendent.

Rather than mandate consolidation in ways that will disrupt our communities, lawmakers should focus on providing towns with greater authority to control increases in education spending, including issues that towns participating in regional school districts are currently facing in trying to control the size of education budgets.

Although legislation was adopted encouraging regional boards of education to have regional boards of finance, many boards of education are reluctant to do so. Region 13 did create a regional board of finance after pressure from the towns, but they have not encouraged

constructive dialogue in efforts to control education costs. We therefore support Section 7 of the bill which will ensure that regional boards of education benefit have regional boards of finance to provided needed fiscal expertise.

In addition, the Minimum Budget Requirement, which provides that towns must budget the same as they did in the previous year, with certain exceptions, makes it very difficult to reduce education budgets. Due to declining enrollment, Region 13 closed a school and faced considerable difficulties in reducing the budget to reflect the cost savings.

As a member of Regional School District 13, we do look for opportunities to share services with other communities and school districts, through purchasing consortiums, and other avenues. However, one-size-fits-all forced school consolidation does not make sense given the unique needs of different communities. A cost-benefit analysis must be undertaken that provides towns and school districts with information on areas that may produce savings and enrich education. Forced regionalization does not guarantee cost savings and may disrupt the delivery and quality of education for students. Also, because Durham and Middlefield share a school district, we have partnered already in other areas such as senior transportation, a transfer station and other municipal services. We have forged those partnerships voluntarily without the need for compulsory statutory language.

Rather than mandate consolidation, lawmakers should explore options for improving efficiencies through technology, that will allow towns to share back office functions, and provide opportunities for students to study subjects that are not offered in the school district.

I thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Laura L. Francis