

To the Committee:

I write in support of SB 874: AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT. This bill would create a commission to investigate possible costs savings that might be realized by combining certain activities across school districts or in some cases, by creating regional schools.

As noted in a 2018 report by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, “K-12 Regionalization in Connecticut: Pros, Cons, and Surprises,” regionalization is not a cure-all for reducing costs in public schools. Indeed, in the case of the state’s largest districts, that report argued that both cost effectiveness and academic achievement could be improved by “deconsolidating” districts. The study found that, balancing the needs of cost efficiency and academic achievement, the optimum range of district size for Connecticut was approximately 2,500 to 3,000 students.

As a resident (and past student in the public schools) of Canton, a town with a substantially smaller enrollment than this ideal (total enrollment across 4 schools of 1,550; high school enrollment of 490), I have seen the cost to students when small towns with lower tax bases cannot afford to provide the same academic benefits as their richer neighbors. Canton offers two foreign languages; Simsbury offers four. Canton offers 13 Advanced Placement courses; Simsbury offers 26. Although Canton schools’ relative standing has improved in recent decades, those of us who attended Canton schools in the 1970s and 1980s remember that the Horton v. Meskill case challenging unequal educational funding across Connecticut’s towns and cities originated in Canton. Despite repeated victories for the plaintiffs in that case, Connecticut school funding is still over-reliant on local property taxes, and the education afforded to Connecticut students is still fundamentally unequal as a result.

Connecticut’s population is aging more rapidly than that of the United States as a whole. Canton has the highest percentage of senior citizens—and the lowest median household income—in the Farmington Valley. These statistics do not bode well for the future of our smallest towns’ ability and willingness to fund quality public schools.

SB 874 offers a reasonable approach to studying ways in which districts might combine resources to bring about the best educational outcomes at the lowest cost. I encourage the committee, and the commission formed under this bill if passed, to consider not just consolidation of smaller districts, but also deconsolidation of the largest districts, as ways to improve both efficiency and academic achievement, as recommended in the Hartford Foundation’s report. That report suggested that as much as \$118 million might be saved through deconsolidation of 14 of the largest districts, along with a further \$51 million through regionalization of 57 of the smaller districts.

While consolidation of services or even regionalization are not cure-alls and should be carried out with care, neither should they be considered “terrifying,” as some legislators who oppose this and similar bills are saying. Too often, the term “local control,” like the term “states’ rights,” has been used as a political dog whistle to attempt to frighten residents about the possibility of their children attending schools with students who don’t look like them. I urge the committee to evaluate this bill on its merits and not to resort to or accept fear-mongering in place of reasoned arguments for (or against) its passage.

Catherine Kenney
580 Cherry Brook Road
Canton, CT 06019
(860) 693-8944