

**Re: Testimony on SB 457, SB 738, SB 874 and HB7192.**

February 27, 2019

Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and esteemed members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for allowing us to submit testimony on SB 457, SB 738, SB 874 and HB7192. We are Alicia and Scott Lawrence, and we are writing from Wilton to OPPOSE ALL of these bills.

Few decisions are as important to a parent as the choice of where and how to educate their child. The key word is choice.

Each of these bills eliminates that choice by proposing to transfer control and resources away from communities like Wilton, to one degree or another, whether by force of regulation or coercion of funds, and whether accomplished this year or later, or by putative commission study, budget implementer bills or simple decree. In so doing, these bills will irreparably damage a long and successful history of local control of education for our communities and state. They push ill-advised, top-down approaches, potentially punish communities that have prudently managed their educational costs with little or no state assistance, solve none of the state's fiscal issues created by its own mismanagement and result in worse outcomes for students, parents, teachers and taxpayers statewide. These proposals and their results are unacceptable.

We have two boys in Wilton schools. Like parents throughout our state, we have a two-full-time worker household with ever-increasing workloads, costs of living and taxes, but our children's education is our chief concern. We ask how school goes each day. We talk about classes, friends, teachers, games, tests, homework and . . . homework again, etc., as parents do statewide. We feel a mixture of intense pride and joy, and at times serious concern and frustration, at what we hear, as parents do statewide.

We do these things as parents and as part of a cohesive local community that knows our kids and personally invests in their education, growth and well-being in and out of school. We know our kids' teachers. We know the administrators. We know the Board of Education members. One child plays lacrosse with the Superintendent's son. Both boys have sung weekly for years in a church choir with a beloved music teacher and raised chickens with two other outstanding teachers and mentors. We know and have a say in what's going on in periodic reports from teachers and the schools and multiple Board of Education and PTA meetings each month. Most importantly, we have a budget process culminating in Wilton's Annual Town Meeting, where every taxpayer in town – parent or not – has the opportunity to have a direct say in the education budget, to make motions on the budget and then vote on the final budget. That's real control. Take away that control or funding with state mandates like the ones proposed here, including pension push-downs that remain beyond town control, and the whole ecosystem suffers and, eventually, fails.

These are not just halcyon musings: local community connections and control have significant tangible economic and fiscal value. Strong school performance and local control are proven drivers of Wilton's attraction as a place people choose to live, work, do business and educate their children. Numerous studies and surveys done in the last five years as part of ongoing town planning processes have repeatedly made this obvious point. We are living proof. One of us was born and raised in Norwalk and lived his childhood in Norwalk, Fairfield and Westport in addition to Florida and California. The other was born and raised in California. We are two professionals who have lived and worked nearly all of our life in high-tax states, including Connecticut, New York and California. When faced with the choice of where to live to work and educate our kids, we chose to leave Southern California, which has many poorly-

performing schools under massive, unaccountable district and county control, and chose to return to Connecticut, and Wilton, specifically, because of the successful schools operating under local control. As a community, we pay higher home prices, costs of living and property taxes to fund our choices, while still providing significant income and sales tax revenues to the state and drawing few state resources in return. Wilton folks may disagree – loudly and often – about these choices, but we make them as a community and treasure the fact that, for better, not worse, the choices are ours to make.

Conversely, this isn't about "Wilton versus Norwalk" or indifference or antipathy towards other communities or other similar demagoguery. Concern about major proposed changes to local education control and funding isn't dictated by zip codes or politics – this concern is real, it defies stereotypes and it is felt statewide.

While Wilton has upheld its end of the home-rule bargain, the state has not, and these bills make things worse. The proposed bills push additional, uncontrolled costs onto municipalities while doing little to fix the state-caused funding and pension messes and nothing to improve education quality or outcomes. If this is about fixing fiscal mismanagement and unsustainable policies, then do so: cut state government and public employee costs; enable towns to negotiate employee pension terms alongside salary and benefits; revamp binding arbitration rules; allow new hires to be placed in defined contribution retirement plans; let the towns continue to work on voluntary, incentive-and-market-based, cost-saving measures at the local and regional level, as is already occurring in Wilton and neighboring towns. Given the incentives and freedom to experiment and truly control education costs, locally or regionally, towns could unearth best practices missing from a top-down study and approach. As Wilton's First Selectwoman aptly noted on the Governor's "voluntary" regionalization commission study and proposals: "Wilton already does it better on our own."

Please recognize that forced approaches to education control and funding will cause people to rethink their choices - about where they live, where they work, where new business will relocate and where they will invest in their future. Under the current proposals, strong education systems like Wilton's will suffer, people and business will leave, home values will fall, and tax revenues will shrink statewide, and the very problems you're trying to solve will only get worse. Connecticut's students need a better plan.

You can still make the right choice. Please do.

Thank you again for hearing our testimony.

Respectfully,

Alicia and Scott Lawrence  
Wilton, Connecticut