

Testimony regarding SB 874
February 27, 2019

Senator Robert Sanchez and Senator Douglas McCrory, Co-Chairs, Education Committee
And Members of the Education Committee,

I am writing to testify against SB 874. As a current Wilton Board of Education member, a retired Superintendent of Schools (Ridgefield), and a long-term Wilton resident and taxpayer, I oppose SB 874.

In local press conferences and meetings with elected officials, SB 874 has been presented as seeking voluntary backoffice efficiencies and some administrative restructuring and sharing in very small districts through incentives.

However, after reading the actual language in SB 874, I conclude that the bill is instead much more threatening. Here are my concerns:

1. People move to Wilton because of our schools. The schools are the heart of our community. As residents, we have known this anecdotally but it was recently affirmed in a professionally designed, statistically valid survey of residents initiated by our Board of Finance. SB 874 undermines our tradition and identity when it forms a commission to “study consolidation of school services and school districts.”
2. Most alarming is the language in the bill calling for a report from the commission in January, 2020, asking for preliminary recommendations about district sizes, district types, number of schools, total number of districts, and enrollment in districts (lines 85 to 92). This sounds like potential reorganization of all or most school districts in the state. It is not a stretch to conclude that forced regionalization could be the objective. This language in SB 874 could bring chaos and division across our state.
3. The Wilton Public School district is a high performing district with an excellent faculty, quality programs, engaged students, involved parents, and a supportive community. We have built a reputation over the past decades for educational excellence. SB 874 does nothing to improve the quality of our schools; instead it undermines it with the specter of regionalization. Or, if we escape regionalization, then there is the possibility of having to revise our governance structure. For example, the bill contains language about which districts would be penalized (reduced state funding) for having their own superintendent. Criteria include districts with two or fewer elementary schools, which means Wilton. The irony is that Wilton employs a campus model (one centralized school for all students within a grade span) which is very efficient.

4. The language in SB 874 about shared services and back office efficiencies is something Wilton is already doing. Wilton schools and the town have worked together to find efficiencies and savings. Recently, the school business manager position and the town finance officer position have been combined into one position. In addition, the school facilities director has been combined with the town facility director. Our town and schools also have invested in solar power for long-term energy savings. We will continue to examine efficiencies and shared services.
5. SB 874 is not thoughtful. SB 874 does not describe researching other states for models of successful voluntary cost savings strategies between school districts. SB 874 does not speak about improved educational outcomes.

Here are some other ideas:

1. Consider administering state education testing every other year rather than annually. Connecticut used to do this. It would save money and increase instructional time. As an educator, I don't think that extensive state testing data needs to be generated every year. Alternating years is sufficient to improve programming and monitor student progress, especially when considering the local assessments administered to students. I understand testing is federally mandated, but Connecticut could build a case for a waiver. It would surely be easier than the uproar created by any forced regionalization.
2. Support the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) priority to "Remove barriers and support incentives for voluntary interdistrict collaboration that provide efficiencies and program enhancements through shared services." One example - each district licenses student information and special education software so perhaps set up state or RESC purchasing plans to bring down costs. The same could be done for hardware. SB 874 contains language about looking at bus transportation. It would be worthwhile to investigate assisting districts in structuring consolidated transportation bids.
3. Research other states as to successful voluntary cost-savings strategies between school districts and their impact on educational outcomes.

I understand, as most Connecticut residents do, that Connecticut is in a fiscal crisis. I also understand that cost-saving proposals will always have critics. However, SB 874 as written is troubling and threatening to what is most precious and successful in Wilton – our schools.

Sincerely,
Deborah Low
Wilton Board of Education member
former Ridgefield Public Schools Superintendent (retired)
Long-time Wilton resident

