



**Testimony
Rudy Marconi
First Selectman, Town of Ridgefield
On behalf of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns
Before the Education Committee
March 1, 2019**

My name is Rudy Marconi, First Selectman of Ridgefield and I am the President of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST), which represents 110 smaller communities throughout Connecticut.

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

REDISTRICTING/CONSOLIDATION SHOULD NOT BE A FORGONE CONCLUSION

SB-874 establishes a Commission on Shared School Services (COSSS) to “develop a plan for the redistricting or consolidation of school services and school districts”. As drafted, without any consideration whatsoever of whether redistricting or consolidation will achieve cost savings or undermine education quality, the bill mandates a plan for redistricting or consolidating school districts.

COST opposes forced consolidation/regionalization because 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.

If, as indicated in remarks about the bill, it is intended to facilitate a discussion about shared services and regional approaches, the bill must be overhauled to direct the development of a plan to support efforts to *facilitate* voluntary shared services/regional approaches to delivering education that are proven to achieve cost savings and preserve or improve the quality of education.

BILL UNFAIRLY PENALIZES SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Section 5 of SB-874 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. Districts that retain a separate superintendent will have the cost subtracted from their ECS funds.

By imposing a penalty on small school districts that retain a separate superintendent, this proposal *forces rather than facilitates* opportunities for improving efficiencies. It unfairly penalizes small school districts even though many larger school districts may have many layers of administration. Some small school districts rely on part-time superintendents or require their superintendents to fulfill additional roles and responsibilities that may be performed by assistant superintendents or other administrators in a larger school district. Instead of penalizing school districts, lawmakers should initiate a review of spending levels across categories for *all* school districts and determine where there are opportunities to improve efficiencies across the board.

In addition, as drafted, it is unclear whether the board appoints a chief executive officer, and what qualifications such officer should have. It is also unclear how a board of education could “receive direction” from a superintendent not in its employ.

IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SHARED SERVICES/CONSOLIDATION

Although towns and BOEs may be able to report on services that they are *considering* sharing or consolidating, without undertaking feasibility studies to determine whether such approaches will achieve cost savings or require any additional start-up costs, etc., it will be difficult to provide definitive information on which services will be shared or consolidated in this timeframe. In addition, such efforts must consider the impact on the quality and delivery of education. We also recommend that the state develop best practices on shared services/regional approaches to assist other towns and boards of education.

REGIONAL BOARDS OF EDUCATION

We support Section 7 of the bill which requires each regional board of education to establish a regional board of finance to review and make recommendations regarding the budget and expenses. This will ensure that costs are appropriately considered by individuals that have a greater understanding of the local finances of the respective towns.

In addition to the revisions we have suggested above, SB-874 should be revised to provide towns with the tools to better control education costs, including:

- **Eliminating the Minimum Budget Requirement** - If the goal is cost savings, give towns and taxpayers the ability to control education costs by eliminating the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) for all non-Alliance school districts. Despite changes to the MBR to



provide towns with greater flexibility to reduce education budgets, the MBR continues to be administered in a way that makes it impossible for towns to reduce education costs.

- **Addressing concerns with existing regional school districts** – In addition to the provisions requiring regional boards of finance, COST recommends the inclusion of language allowing the use of a five-year rolling average in determining the Average Daily Membership (ADM) in schools for purposes of calculating member town allocations. ADM, the amount each town within a region is required to pay per student, is currently calculated in October for the following school year. Due to year to year fluctuations in student enrollment, towns are unable to budget effectively.
- **Facilitating the consolidation of non-educational expenditures** - Lawmakers should build on efforts to assist municipalities in facilitating the consolidation of non-education expenditures to achieve cost savings.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the bill.

COST is an advocacy organization committed to giving small towns a strong voice in the legislative process. COST champions the major policy needs and concerns of Connecticut's suburban and rural towns.