

Testimony on SB 738, 457 and 874
February 20, 2019

To the members of the hearing committee:

I thank you for your time in reading my testimony. My name is Drew Michael McWeeny and I am a lifelong resident of Connecticut. I received my K-12 education through the Wolcott Public Schools and received undergraduate degrees from Southern Connecticut State University. I currently work as a preschool self-contained special education teacher of 3-year old children at Bucks Hill Elementary School Pre-K at the Annex. I am a first-year teacher.

I urge you to vote “no” to ***Senate Bill 738: AN ACT CONCERNING THE CREATION OF REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS, 457: AN ACT CONCERNING THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS and 874: AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT.***

I am writing to you today, as a concerned Connecticut public school teacher, to explain exactly (1) how these three Senate bills will harm the work that I and my fellow colleagues do on a daily basis and (2) how these three Senate bills will harm students in both larger school districts and smaller school districts. I am one of the only people writing testimony and testifying in public that is a public school teacher – A job that no elected legislator does daily between the hours of 8:25 A.M. and 3:25 P.M. (and thereafter each day).

I teach in the Waterbury Public School district. Our district contains over 19,000 students and contains around 1,403 teachers. It is an urban school district with most of our families that are identified as low-income. I have an morning (A.M.) class of 5 students. I am the only teacher in the classroom and have one paraeducator. All my students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This is a legal document that contains a literacy, numeracy, behavioral and social/emotional, fine and gross motor, and independent living category. Each category contains roughly 3-5 objectives (depending on the level of the child) that they are expected to meet. There are usually 3-5 objectives for each category.

The skills that I teach include everything from completing an 10-piece inset and onset puzzle, sorting and identifying shapes and colors, how to eat food and drink liquids, bathroom training, to how to walk and socialize with adults and peers in large and small group settings. The list goes on and on.

Our school is a NAEYC-accredited school. NAEYC stands for the National Association for the Education of Young Children. NAEYC is a code of ethics and professional standards and competencies for early childhood programs and educators. One specific code for NAEYC is class size. The maximum amount of students that I can have in my classroom is 10. While I currently have 5, the amount will increase.

My students came to me from Birth-to-Three. This is their first ever formal educational setting. Imagine what it is like being 3-years old and being in an environment that you do not know. The children are scared, confused and need a sense of guidance, trust, and love. In all cases, each of my special education students demand 1-on-1 attention.

This now sets the stage for the first reason why I urge you to vote “no” to Senate Bills 738, 457, and 874. When legislators talk about consolidating any school districts, their main justification is because it will save money. However, school consolidation actually increases costs. Consolidated school districts usually make use of larger schools which implies that average transportation distance must increase. This results in an increase for a district’s transportation spending per pupil. Currently, it takes a long time for buses to come to my school. Multiple days, it took 2 buses over 40 minutes to arrive to my school to drop students off. So, if we consolidated schools, it will take even more time for students to get to my school because buses have longer distances to travel. And this takes away from my instructional time to provide high-quality programming and 1-on-1 direct and explicit instruction because students will spend way too much time on the bus.

Urban cities and towns such as Waterbury are harder to clean up than their suburban and rural counterparts. In the instance of the 2 buses taking over 40 minutes to arrive to my school to drop off my students, A.M. and P.M. preschool classes are 2 hours and 30 minutes long. That is not enough time for 1-on-1 direct and explicit instruction. My and my colleagues’ students will not receive fair and adequate time for such educational instruction if the bus rides take longer. There is simply no extra time left in the day given the fact that A.M. and P.M. preschool classes are, again, 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Now add on the amount of Parent Principal Teacher (PPT) meetings and IEP meetings I and my colleagues have to attend during the day which takes us out of the classroom. Students are missing educational time from us. Additionally, add on the behavioral problems that teachers have to address daily, such as students who drop to the floor banging their head because they are having trouble transitioning from different activities.

This is how the increase in transportation will take time away from 1-on-1 direct and explicit instruction that ironically, legislators expect us to do. Therefore, this is the first reason why these three Senate bills will (1) harm the work that I and my fellow colleagues do on a daily basis and (2) how these three Senate bills will harm students that I and my colleagues teach in both larger school districts and smaller school districts.

The second reason why I, as a public school teacher, urge you to vote “no” to Senate Bills 738, 457, and 874 is because my and my colleagues’ class sizes will increase. Imagine having the maximum of 10 students in your class with disabilities ranging from Downs Syndrome, Autism, Spina Bifida, Cerebral Palsy, physically handicapped, and even learning disabilities (also referred to as “intellectual disabilities”). Not only do all these students possess characteristics that affect their learning in the classroom, they come from diverse families. Some have single mothers, single fathers, grandparents and extended family raising them and some are even foster children and adopted children who come from families that have lived and experienced a life of violence, crime and drugs.

School consolidation does not work for this reason because you will increase the amount of students in the classroom. This means that you have increased the diverse environments and characteristics. Specifically, in my case as a special education teacher, you have increased the amount of disabilities. It is very hard for me to, again, provide 1-on-1 direct and explicit instruction and meet the needs of such learners with more students than I can handle. And anyone who has even tangential experience in a classroom would be overwhelmed with just having 5 kids let alone more than the maximum of 10.

My students need all the attention they can get. Therefore, this is another reason why these three Senate bills will harm the work that I and my fellow colleagues do on a daily basis and (2) how these three Senate bills will harm students that I and my colleagues teach in both larger school districts and smaller school districts. My concern is that the number of students can double should the three Senate bills go through.

The third reason why I, as a public school teacher, urge you to vote “no” to Senate bills 738, 457, and 874 is because I am suspicious of section 2(b) of Senate bill 738.

According to a colleague of mine who is a union president, the teachers and other labor unions hate negotiating separately with over 145 school districts because every once in a while one of them succeeds in holding back pay and benefit demands which emboldens others to do the same. It is so much easier for a union to have a few mega school district labor agreements with a disproportionate number of “regional” BOE members from urban Democrat-controlled cities willing to spend money.

As such, the per pupil cost is most often highest in the largest districts. Therefore, the “economy of scale” argument is largely a farce because free market expense controls do not exist in state-mandated education. I urge a legislator to prove me wrong on this.

This leads me, as a public school teacher, to question the legislature on a few points. The first point is: Where is the legislature modeling school consolidation from? I am just trying to understand why the legislature thinks school consolidation is a good option. I believe that when Governor Ned Lamont states that we need “good, sound evidence to support decision making,” he did not mean for the Senate President Martin Looney (D-New Haven) to take an idea and draft a bill based on the idea.

“Good, sound evidence” means evidence-based studies. These take a minimum of 10 years and for something to be evidence-based, it means the same results have been proven in every study conducted. Therefore, in order for school consolidation to be effective, the legislature needs to have evidence that either our school districts are not currently functioning effectively and/or other districts in other states are functioning effectively with school consolidation. So far, the legislature has shown me no such evidence with both that justifies a positive and direct correlation as to why school consolidation would be effective in Connecticut.

The next point I question the legislature on is: If consolidation was in fact cost effective and evidence-based, then why isn’t the legislature advocating for a more appropriate way to go about this, which would be by offering incentives to encourage towns to choose to do this? The state government would probably find more support for consolidation if there was an incentive to seek it out. Towns can decide if this is best for them and could seek partner districts that share similar goals or have resources that others are lacking.

The third point that I question the legislature on is: Why is force and decree of a commission effective in getting school districts in Connecticut to consolidate? The last time I checked, all the legislators know, as political scientists, that force is not democracy. Connecticut residents can not allow our autonomy to be compromised. Education is very personal to people, not to mention the large role it plays in determining property values.

My last point that I question the legislature on comes from my daily, direct life experiences as a public school teacher specifically teaching in an urban, larger school district. My point is that legislatures failed to ask: “How do the larger school districts feel about spreading out their resources and letting neighboring towns in?” Where is the effort to seek this information out? Why isn’t there a task force created to examine school consolidation?

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. I am not in favor of any policy that will (1) harm the work that I and my fellow colleagues do on a daily basis and (2) will harm students in both larger school districts and smaller school districts. In conclusion, I urge you to vote “no” for ***Senate Bill 738: AN ACT CONCERNING THE CREATION OF REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS, 457: AN ACT CONCERNING THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS, and 874: AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT.***

At the very least, policy should avoid perpetuating this process.

Please contact me if I can be of help in the future on this piece of legislation.

Thank you for listening to teachers like me.

Respectfully submitted,

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