

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

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on SB 457, SB 738 and SB 874.

My name is Alexandra Ralph and I am a new resident of Wilton, Connecticut. My husband and I are in our mid 30s and have 4 young children, age 7 and under. We moved to Wilton from our home in Norwalk, CT in May of 2018. My husband's job in Manhattan left us with my many community options in the greater NYC area. We chose Fairfield County, CT and ultimately the town of Wilton because of the small-town feel - and more importantly, for the high quality, small school system. Our move over the town line was made ONLY to put our 4 young children into the Wilton Public School system.

We are in strong opposition to SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874 and any other bill that opens the door to regionalization of Connecticut Public Schools. A recent (2018) study sponsored by the Hartford Foundation, found that K-12 regionalization, which generally includes combining school districts, boards of education, and central office staff, can result in closing schools, eliminating teaching positions, reducing administrative staff, and increasing student-to-teacher ratios, among other consequences. Additionally, they found that "regionalization may lead to diseconomies of scale resulting from: higher transportation expenses because of longer bus routes, overall increases (leveling up) in staff salaries because of seniority and/or contract renegotiation and increases in the number of mid-level administrators and administrative support staff."

Warning of the perils of large, consolidated schools, the report also included the finding that "Students who are involved in extracurricular activities (e.g., band, sports, clubs) have higher graduation rates and it is widely accepted that participation in extracurricular activities decreases as enrollment increases."

Furthermore, the report also provides a cautionary tale regarding demographics and the impact of school closing decisions: "While it seems apparent that the closing of school buildings will reduce costs, savings are limited because there may not be buyers, and the facilities still must be maintained by the school district. In already struggling neighborhoods, these now empty school buildings (with boarded windows) contribute to a downward economic spiral.

The report also explains, "Students from advantaged (i.e., high socioeconomic status) households have similar educational achievement in both small and large schools. However, the situation is much different for students from low-income communities for whom "... smaller [school] size mediates the association between socioeconomic status and achievement." The potential for high educational achievement diminishes for at-risk students when they attend large schools that are disconnected from their communities."

We are also in strong opposition to the Governor's bill 7150. To require municipalities to fund a portion of teacher pension costs for a "tax grab" is appalling. This concept is a dereliction of state responsibility. The plan includes a surcharge for a town like Wilton that pays teacher salaries that exceed the state median but doesn't account for a higher cost of living in areas such as Fairfield county or for the impact of binding arbitration. Local municipalities had no influence over the design or the decision to fund (or not fund) the plan. The state should not be shifting the burden to local municipalities that have responsibly managed their finances.

Also, any plan to divert motor vehicle tax away from towns and have the state re-distribute tax funds as they seem fit is completely misguided. Towns like Wilton have been very efficient in using their property tax dollars for quality education. I don't see why they should be punished for the failure of other districts.

The amount of combined property taxes and motor vehicle taxes are already very high compared to that of our Westchester and Northern Bergen county neighbors. Over the past few weeks, we have questioned our "forever" home in Connecticut. If these bills were proposed last year when we were house hunting, I can tell you with 100% certainty that we would not have purchased here. We would have either looked elsewhere or rented until this all got settled.

Placing this additional tax burden on the towns, coupled with school regionalization, will force constituents like us to leave Connecticut and further exacerbate the exodus of people (and corporations) leaving the state. We believe that the value of our town, among other things, comes from the sense of community and quality of public services, including its schools, and these bills will tarnish that value. We appreciate your consideration from the perspectives of two relatively new (and young) home buyers in CT.

Thank you again for reading our testimony.

Regards,

Alexandra and Andrew Ralph