

SB 457, SB 738, and SB 874

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, legislation that in effect calls for towns to consolidate educational services with neighboring communities. As a teacher, a lawyer, and a parent, I have a deeply vested interest in this issue and its outcome. In districts across the state, we have been hearing about issues concerning declining enrollment for the last ten years. There is no doubt that the data illustrating a seven percent drop in student enrollment over that time period suggests that it is a real issue that should serve as a catalyst for change in education across the state; however, the solutions to this issue are not as clearly cut as these legislative proposals would suggest.

Declining enrollment is an effect. As with all effects, triaging the ailment is only putting a bandage on the real issue that is causing the effect. In this case, there are many causes that have created the current issues with declining enrollment, such as rising taxes, falling home values, fewer job opportunities, higher cost of living, and limited public transportation in Connecticut. These are all truly monumental issues that are no doubt impacting many areas of the state in terms of financial security. So why focus solely on schools and education as a scapegoat for issues such as this? When the financial instability started to impact Connecticut as early as 2005, heightening with the recession in 2008, it was education budgets and schools that were cut the deepest. School personnel saw pay freezes, givebacks, and staff reductions. Per student costs and student opportunities were cut to all-time lows. Pay-for-play became more of the rule than the exception. Yet more than a decade later, schools are being threatened again, regardless of how well they have been able to rise above all of the cuts and continue to help students thrive despite economic woes.

More specifically, these bills fail to acknowledge the wonderful schools, districts, and communities that would be forever decimated were the bills to pass. Collectively, these bills require that districts with fewer than 2,000 students join or create a new region or eventually be forced to do so at the hands of a newly created Commission on Shared School Services. The argument behind this speaks to a theory that small schools mean fewer opportunities for students. I can assure you that this theory does not always hold up in practice. Take the district in which I teach for example.

Thomaston Public Schools is tiny, with just 900 students in the district; yet the district boasts: fifteen varsity sports teams, with multiple State Championships in basketball, softball, field hockey, cross country, and baseball over the past decade; six Advanced Placement courses, four UConn Early College Experience courses, a Paralegal Certification Program in conjunction with Post University, a Science and Engineering Cohort Program, a Certified Nurse Aide Program, and a Small Engine Repair Program; twenty-two extra-curricular clubs; more than

\$20,000 in scholarships for graduating seniors; and consistently one of the lowest in the state in per-pupil spending. The district allows for smaller class sizes that average to seventeen students per class. Relationships between students and staff are strong and personal. Students do not have the opportunity to “slip through the cracks” when everyone in the building knows who you are and is genuinely invested in your success. Thanks to our small school culture here, our students succeed and many have gone on to become doctors, lawyers, accountants, military officers, and teachers themselves.

The town and the community itself exists around the schools in a way that hearkens back to the communities of yesteryear. The community is small and close-knit in a way that one can only truly understand by being present. Let me give you an example. Thomaston girls basketball won the state championships back in 2013. When the team was leaving for Uncasville that Friday afternoon, their bus was escorted by police cars, fire engines, and a caravan of cars that became a makeshift parade. As they made their way down Main Street toward the highway, they were greeted by throngs of people who came out to cheer them on from the side of the road. Thomaston Center School students came out of the building carrying signs to support their Lady Bears. Business owners and customers came out of the shops to stand along the side of the road and cheer them on as they drove past them. The sight at the arena was no less heartwarming as the stands at Mohegan were packed with Thomaston residents and fans of all ages. We all joked that anyone looking to rob someone would have it easy in Thomaston that night because nearly the entire town was at the casino to see the game. It’s the kind of town with the kind of pride that inspires people, both students and teachers, to do more, to be more. The kind of town that would be devastated to be forced to consolidate with another district and lose their traditions.

What’s more is that there seems to be no reason to need to consolidate in Thomaston. For one, we share costs with other districts in many areas, such as oil contracts, business manager, food service director, shared insurance pools, and student outplacement services. If anything, it would seem like the most efficient way to improve costs is to continue to pursue more opportunities for cost-sharing with other districts and limiting as much overhead as possible. In this way the district would continue to be more financially sound without impacting the district or community.

These are not just my opinions alone either. The Connecticut School Finance Project recently released nonpartisan, research-based information about school district consolidation. Some of their “key findings from the academic literature review regarding the academic and financial impacts of school district consolidation” include:

[t]here is no conclusive evidence that school district consolidation positively or negatively impacts students’ academic performance. However, arguments can be made that access to educational opportunities such as Advance Placement courses, elective courses, and athletics is improved by consolidating very small school districts. In studies where student performance was shown to be negatively correlated with school district

size, other variables, such as student income and student-teacher ratios, have much stronger effects on student achievement than the size of school districts.

In a district such as Thomaston, where students are getting the kind of attention typically only available from a private school setting, these opportunities are already widespread for students. In this case, it appears that bigger schools do not necessarily mean better schools, which should be the true priority.

If we are only to look at the economic implications of consolidating, the Connecticut School Finance Project's report also stated that:

[r]esearch on the fiscal impacts of school district consolidation shows economies of scale are likely to occur when smaller districts combine to form a single, larger school district. Although there is a lack of agreement in academia on the methodologies for determining the most efficient school district size, there is substantial evidence — across research methodologies — that cost efficiency is expected to increase when smaller school districts consolidate.

Even this seems an unlikely possibility for improvement if a town such as Thomaston were forced to consolidate. Thomaston has historically been one of the more efficient districts in the state when it comes to per-pupil spending, yet Thomaston has also historically been above the state average in many educational data factors, such as absenteeism, graduation rates, and standardized test scoring.

I understand the intent of the proposed bills, and I agree that there is a growing need to make real change in Connecticut's economy, but it should not come at the cost of educating our children. This legislation would be detrimental to the districts where I live and work as well as many other districts across the state.

Thank you again for hearing my testimony. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Susan A. Santovasi, Esq.