



Testimony on Governor's Bill No. 874 (an act concerning education initiatives and services in Connecticut)

Submitted by Scott Shepard, Policy Director

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Good afternoon. My name is Scott Shepard. I am the Policy & Research Director for the Yankee Institute for Public Policy, Connecticut's free-market think tank. I submit this note in opposition to the Governor's Bill, No. 874.

There is much to object to in Governor Lamont's proposed bill. This testimony will focus on the composition, purpose, powers and limitations of the proposed Commission on Shared School Services and its development of "a plan for the redistricting or consolidation of school services and school districts."¹ There are certainly some distinct opportunities for the centralization of services between schools in specific instances in Connecticut, and doubtless some circumstances in which full school-district consolidation would be productive both of improved student results for all students and of cost savings. Because this proposed bill has not been effectively designed to find those instances, while potentially doing much harm at great cost besides, we wholeheartedly oppose it.

As preliminary matters of intense concern, we note two things:

1. The Governor's Director of the Office of Policy & Management, when testifying before the General Assembly recently, was unable to explain whether this bill would give the Governor and his Commission the power to mandate school-district consolidation.² This is disqualifying. The General Assembly should not be asked to vote for a bill that would grant the governor and his agents unclear and ill-defined but potentially transformative powers. The least the governor owes the people – particularly the parents and students of Connecticut – is to be forthright with them about what powers his own legislation would grant to him and his subordinates.

¹ See Governor's Bill No. 874, at 1.

² See The Governor's Bill Leaves Question of Forced School Regionalization "Open" (video), available at <https://youtu.be/a3YqMyd7tHl>.

2. Any claim that potential school-service centralization or school-district consolidation would save the state's taxpayers money is undermined by the fact that the Commission will be assigned to make "preliminary recommendations concerning how future labor contracts should be negotiated as additional educational services are shared following redistricting," while a definite working group of the assigned members of the Commission will themselves be representatives of the unions with whom the state will negotiate in these contracts. The primary way that the state, school districts, and taxpayers will realize savings - if any - from centralization and consolidation will be from reducing labor costs. But this bill concedes that labor costs will not be reduced at all until the next bargaining process after any centralization or consolidation arises, and that the unions will have effective veto power over how the state organizes those bargaining procedures. The result will inevitably be protection for union interests, which eviscerates opportunities for meaningful cost savings. We see here once again a depressing reiteration of the process that is impoverishing our state: the government-employee unions being treated by the state a co-equal governing partners, rather than merely one interest among many (including taxpayers, parent, students, and other groups) whose interests the state should consider, but not exalt.

The single most astonishing fact about this bill, however, is this: in all of the various factors, including school size, transportation costs and such that the Commission is empowered and required to consider in promulgating its recommendations about school-service centralization and school-district consolidation, one that does not come up *anywhere* is the relative educational results currently being achieved by the state's schools and school districts. ***The Commission is neither required nor permitted to consider the core, central thing for which any sane or competent school system is organized: teaching its students effectively.***

It is apparently of no interest to the state, as it considers the question of potential centralization or consolidation, either how well schools and school districts are currently doing at their *only job*, or how well they might do in the wake of state recommended or - effectively or actually - mandated consolidations.

This failure is so sweeping that it invalidates every other consideration in this bill. We hope, of course, that this committee will on this ground reject this ill-considered and ill-design proposal, but in fact we hope more: we hope that the Governor and his staff will recognize the fatal flaw and will withdraw the bill.

As we said initially, we do not think that there is no merit in the idea of school-service centralization and school-district consolidation - far from it. But it should proceed - with proper state incentivization but not with clumsy mandates of the sort potentially

implicated in this proposal – organically from the schools and districts themselves at times that make financial sense and under conditions that allow the municipalities, school districts and taxpayers to reap the financial rewards of thoughtful consolidation without putting their children’s educational prospects at risk.

A program for achieving these goals is certainly possible. While crafting the details of such a plan would require careful consideration and study, a few potential provisions can be sketched right away.

(1) When smaller or poorer-performing school districts propose costly capital building plans, the state should have the opportunity to study the cost-effectiveness of the proposal, and to offer similarly costed and feasibility-reviewed alternative plans where appropriate. Should the school district elect to proceed with its initial plan rather than with one demonstrated to be more cost-effective and more likely to achieve improved student results, the school district should bear a significantly increased share of the differential cost.

(2) School districts that demonstrate a serious interest in centralizing services or consolidating with one another should be granted state support in undertaking cost and feasibility studies. Where the studies confirm the propriety of the proposal, the districts should be incentivized with state assistance if they proceed but charged with the cost of the studies if they then back out.

(3) School districts that actually centralize or consolidate should be excused from costly state spending and other mandates that have no effect on student learning or safety, including the minimum-budget formula, that currently makes it very difficult for school districts to reduce their costs, or to realize the benefits of centralization or consolidation.

(4) Similarly, school districts that actually centralize or consolidate should be granted the power to open collectively bargained contracts that limit their opportunities either to do so or to reap the benefits of having done so.

Because Governor’s Bill No. 874 achieves essentially none of these goals, and fails even to consider school performance and student results in its plans for state-pressured school consolidation, we oppose it. We would be eager to work with all parties to craft sensible legislation that would create incentives for cost-saving school centralization and consolidation that would start from the inviolable premise that in striving to make education more cost effective and better for all, we won’t in the process risk making it worse for any. Nothing less will ever be acceptable.