

Simon Wong
Wilton, CT

February 27, 2019

Regarding:

SB #457 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE SIZE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

SB #738 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE CREATION OF REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

SB #874 - AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION INITIATIVES AND SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT.

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

Thank you for allowing me to submit my written testimony. I am writing to state my opposition to SB 457, SB 738 (formerly SB 457) and SB 874 or any future similar bills or studies in any shape or form.

I am a father of a first grader at Miller Driscoll Elementary School in Wilton, CT. Seven years ago, when my wife and I looked for a place to build our family, we considered numerous towns and cities, including those in New York. Despite longer commutes, we chose Wilton because we value the quality of its schools. Also, we feel Wilton schools have the ideal student size, not too small or too large. We believe we made the right decision as we are pleased to see that our daughter is thriving in Wilton's school environment. Over the years, we have developed close relationships with other parents, teachers, School Superintendent, PTA volunteers, and members of the Board of Education. We appreciate initiatives from local school teachers and administrators to engage parents.

What happened when the pillars of our community, our schools, are subjected to forced regionalization?

First, our schools will undergo profound changes. By definition, regionalized or consolidated schools mean a larger student population and more complexities. Parents, who are unwilling to let their children go through the big unknown territory will pull their children out or move. There will be fewer new families willing to move into and invest in our community. Our community, as we know it, will unravel.

Second, nowhere in these three bills, address the quality of education. How will we be assured that school consolidation will not affect our children's education? Even if it is only to share back-office functions, it will lead to the elimination of a dedicated Superintendent for our schools and our local Board of Education. In Wilton, members of the Board of Education are voted from our community, and therefore they are held accountable by residents of our town. Eliminating the local Board of Education and dedicated superintendent will lead to lower engagement between parents and the

schools. National Education Association (NEA) is unequivocal in their policy to engage parents, families, and communities in the child's education because research has shown that their involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance and school improvement.¹ When schools are forced to regionalize, we lose the one effective ways for parents and communities to be engaged.

Third, if the primary goal is to increase efficiency, then let our local officials seek ways to improve efficiency voluntarily. Our local officials deal with town and schools related matters, and therefore they are the ones that know best. To illustrate, Wilton's First Selectwoman, Lynne Vanderslice, has implemented shared services and regional pricing negotiation effectively. There is one joint CFO for the Town and the School District. Our town participates in the regional purchase of workers' compensation insurance plan through Western Connecticut Council of Governments and enjoyed purchase discounts.

Finally, I am particularly concerned that these bills will harm our special needs students, all of whom require more attention and one-on-one interaction, most. Typically, a special needs classroom consists of 10 students as opposed to non-special needs of 20 students. Regionalization will lead to a higher student-to-teacher ratio. Our most vulnerable ones will not receive proper teaching and will less likely to thrive. Meanwhile, our special needs teachers will face unfair teaching environment and lead to high turnovers. Higher turnover leads to higher labor and employment costs, thus defeating the purpose of forced school regionalization of cost efficiency.

I recognized that SB 738 and SB 457 are merely concepts, but even so, such concepts are causing much anguish in our community. The lack of clarity in these bills is already creating so much confusion. The uncertainties caused by these bills are now overhanging Connecticut, halting the flow of new residents and business investments, sorely needed to rebuild our state. The longer these concepts linger, the more damages they will cause to the of our State Economy. Such circumstances may lead to poor execution with rushed timelines and inadequate participation from the regions with the best schools.

SB 874, while more flushed out, will create a host of other issues. Of particular concern is the creation of Commission of Shared School Services whereby the Commission of fourteen members will only require one member to be a parent of a student enrolled in a public school (Section 1b-7). The Governor and Legislators will form the Commission. Parents and citizens alike will not have control in the formation of the Commission. Another concern is the creation of "Regional Special Education Centers" that will apply to Wilton. Special needs students from our school will share a regional superintendent, thus putting a barrier between parents of special needs and local control of their special

¹Jeynes, W.H. 2003. A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement. *Education & Urban Society* 35(2): 202-218.

needs students. Our schools will be subjected to the Commission of Shared School Services for many years.

It should be noted that regionalization has high failure rates. We should pay attention to such studies because public schools are not for experiments. We all only have one chance to educate our children right in their lifetime, and the threat of forced school regionalization is why thousands of parents, teachers, and citizens of CT have joined in the rapidly growing "Hands Off Our Schools" grassroots movement to protect our local schools. We, parents, are united in rejecting top-down mandates to school regionalization.

Thank you for reading my written testimony. I strongly urge you to oppose SB 738, SB 457 and SB 874 and any other future legislation or study that opens the door to forced regionalization of Connecticut public schools.

Respectfully,

Simon Wong
Wilton, CT