

Dr. Jack Zamary
Superintendent of Schools
Monroe, Connecticut

TESTIMONY: EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING 3/1/2019

Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony regarding the proposals for school regionalization. I would also like to thank Governor Lamont for coming to speak with the Fairfield County First Selectman and Mayors on Tuesday. My first selectman, Ken Kellogg, invited me to attend that meeting and the dialogue was both constructive and productive. In that meeting with the governor, I was glad to hear that his Bill 874 incentivizes collaboration between school districts and towns rather than forcing these partnerships. Regarding the other bills on regionalization, using or referencing probate districts as a model for school regionalization, is misinformed. I spent 15 years of my career as an administrator in a regional school district. School regionalization is not a "one size fits all model" and forcing this model on all districts in Connecticut will be to the detriment of students. The model does work well when consolidating small districts of similar size. Regionalization also creates unintended consequences. As one example, regional boards of education have proportional membership based on the population of each municipality. This construct results in larger districts having more voting power over smaller districts. Larger districts are not necessarily higher performing and the outcomes from such an approach would create some regional districts where the quality of instruction is reduced. Even if this occurs in a small number of regionalized districts, it will be to the detriment of many students in our state.

In the Monroe Schools where I serve as Superintendent, cuts in ECS funding as well the added costs of TRB contributions will have a significant impact on our school budget. The governor's bill promotes districts and towns to find solutions to these cuts through the added

efficiencies of shared services. The focus on finding efficiencies through shared services in “back office” functions makes good sense given that these positions are furthest from classrooms and students. While sharing superintendents between districts would require Board consent, there are no unions involved and a path to achieving that end is realistic in the current bill. However, this is not the case for most other central office employees. In Monroe, like many other municipalities, our Town employees are in different unions than are our Board of Education employees. The efficiencies of shared services between boards and towns as well as between boards can only be realized if bill 874 is revised to include a provision that gives towns and BOEs the authority to make changes within current contracts of these different bargaining groups. The current bill does not seem to provide a clear path to that end.

Another area that needs to be considered within bill 874 is shared special education services. Every district in the State is struggling to manage escalating special education costs, especially in the area of outplacement programs. I am currently working with superintendents in my area to develop regionalized special education programming, where we and our Boards have more control over the quality of programming as well as direct oversight of budgeting. This type of regionalized effort has the potential to be a win-win by providing improved programming at lower cost. Legislation that incentivises this kind of work could bring this idea to fruition within a relatively short period of time, especially when compared to the significant time and resources that would be required to merge whole districts. Incentives should include grants that assist with program start up costs and/or in-kind services from area RESCs. While my district and surrounding districts want to create shared special education programming, we are also projected to receive cuts in educational state aid. While efficiencies will be realized over time, it is unrealistic to have districts find the funds for start up costs while making budget cuts due to reduced state funding.

Connecticut has long been known as the proud home of excellent public schools. I would like to thank the members of the Education Committee for their continued work in keeping our rightful place as a top ranked state for public education. As we move forward, we need to find realistic solutions that yield the most benefit for all of our citizens, no matter if they are attending our schools or if they are paying for our schools. To do that, we must consider collaborative efforts that enhance or maintain learning experiences for students while yielding the greatest fiscal benefits. These ideas do not need to be mutually exclusive, we can achieve both ends. Thank you for your time and consideration of these ideas, and thank you for your continued support of our most precious resource, our students.