Dear Members of Education Committee:

My name is Jennie Caldwell and I live in North Haven, Connecticut. I stand in support of S.B. 738: An Act Concerning the Creation of Regional School Districts. I am testifying in support of this bill as a parent and a public-school employee who has had firsthand experience with both a regionalized school structure and the more fragmented town based structure that currently exists in Connecticut today.

I moved to Connecticut from North Carolina in 2006. As a professional working in the public schools and a parent of 2 children in elementary school, I was surprised by the differences in the quality of education. My daughter came to Clintonville Elementary School with an IEP due to a learning disability. I heard over and over again from her special education and regular education teacher, they could not believe how prepared she when compared to her peers. As the district began to develop curriculum for best practice in teaching math, reading and writing, I realized that the district we came from had already implemented these programs and strategies that North Haven Public Schools was just beginning to explore. In addition to the difference in curriculum there were many programs available to families in my previous district that local districts in Connecticut do not have the resource to implement such as options for before and after school programs, options for magnet schools within the district and a wide variety of programs that could meet the needs of diverse learners without shipping them off to other districts or to a Regional Educational Service Center.

When I moved to Connecticut, I began working for a Regional Educational Service Center, ACES. A majority of my career has been dedicated to working with children with special needs. I was surprised to see the limitations in the resource for children with special needs in Connecticut. Children who had limited or no verbal skills did not have access to augmentative and alternative communication devices which children in my previous district were provided to ensure they had the means to communicate with others. Children were able to stay within the district instead of having to drive on a bus for long distances to find a program that met their needs. I was also surprised at the lack of accountability that occurred within the programs where I was working in Connecticut. In North Carolina, children were educated within their own districts and the schools were accountable for their progress. Children with special needs were in the neighborhood schools and were able to integrate with their peers more easily. Not an easy task when children are in separate schools.

At the middle school and high school levels, children had access to programs that matched their needs and interest because the district was large enough and had enough resources to provide these experiences for student without contracting and paying other districts or area RESCS. These programs included vocational programs, technical education, access to college credit and
honors programs. Schools in North Carolina had the resources to develop robust programs in music, the arts, intermural as well as team sports. Within a regional structure it was possible to provide after school transportation to allow students of all socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in extra curricular activities and extra help if needed. Something that is sporadic and not available in all districts in Connecticut due to funding.

It also became clear to me that having each town run their own district was not an efficient way to run public schools. Each district builds it central office staff to include a superintendent, assistant superintendent, pupil services director, technology coordinator/director, curriculum coordinators, etc. All highly paid professionals the are repeated over and over again. If a district uses the services of the area RESC they pay a middle man to provide teacher training, special education services, curriculum development, technical assistance training and evaluations for assistive technology, etc.

Since moving to Connecticut, I served as a member of the Board of Education for North Haven Public Schools. Managing a budget for a small school district is difficult. Over the course of my six years in office as student population declined, the number of central office staff increased as well as their salaries. Our district struggled to find the balance of meeting the needs of a diverse group of students and managing a growing budget.

Connecticut continues to struggle with student achievement and educational inequality. According to Jennifer B. Ayscue and Gary Orfield (2015) school segregation by race and poverty significantly impacts educational opportunities and success. They cited a study that compared school structure. “In comparison with the less fragmented states of North Carolina and Virginia, (both states have county based school districts) in the highly fragmented states of New York and New Jersey, the typical black and Latino student are exposed to smaller shares of white students, the typical white student is more isolated with other white peers, there are greater disparities in exposure to low-income students by race, the share of non-white segregated schools is substantially larger, and levels of multiracial unevenness are higher.”

On facebook I was asked by a neighbor if I feel the state government should force regionalization upon the towns. I believe that our representatives should do what is in the best interest of all the citizens in the state of Connecticut. I know that change is hard and people may resist but where would our country be today if the government had not intervened to enforce Brown vs Board of Education. Regionalizing schools is important to improve the quality of education for all students across the state to give students access to greater resources and more flexible programs.
There has been a great deal of propaganda that has gone out on this topic to scare the citizens of Connecticut about regionalized schools. There is no reason that regionalized schools will require more time on buses and less time in the classroom. Students can go to their neighborhood schools while the district regionalizes central office staff. Students with special needs would have the opportunity to attend schools closer to home because a regionalized district is more likely to have a program that will meet the child’s needs, something that often cannot be done in our current structure. There has been talk of increased busing expenses and cost of new schools. Busing would be reduced if children had programs closer to home as opposed to having to go to districts far away to find programs that meet their educational needs. Concerns have been raised regarding persevering the quality of education, as I have previously stated this is a way to improve our educational system. I hope you will all take the time to do some research before making any decisions. Please don’t vote on this bill without being truly informed about the fact as opposed to making a decision based on opinion and conjecture. Please take the time to compare educational outcomes of school districts in states with regionalized or county-based schools with our schools under the current system of town-based districts.

I strongly support S.B. 738. I hope the Committee and Connecticut lawmakers will vote this year to take steps to move to a more efficient and equitable structure for delivering educational services in the state of Connecticut.

Thank you for your time,
Jennie Caldwell