STATEMENT OF STEPHEN M. HUDSPETH, resident of Wilton, on

Senate Bill 874 as well as SB 457 & SB 738 for mandatory district consolidation

I testify in opposition to Senate Bill 874 as well as SB 457 & SB 738 (recasting SB 454) for mandatory school district consolidations or the conducting of any studies re: same.

I have grave concerns about a mandatory school consolidation bill passing in any form, including even as simply a directive for a study of the subject. I have submitted testimony previously with respect to SB 738 (recasting SB 454), and write now to include newly submitted SB 874 as well as SB 457.

As expressed in SB 457 and SB 738 (recasting SB 454), mandatory school district consolidation is an insane idea that will cause enormous conflict in the districts affected and their respective towns just as it has already caused tremendous turmoil here in Wilton and can accomplish no intelligent end either in cost savings for us all or in educational achievement for our children.

With respect to SB 874, I respectfully submit that, for a subject as critical to our state’s future as the public education of our children, the focus should first and foremost be on doing no harm. As the mandatory consolidation concept is expressed in SB 874, the proposal makes no attempt to distinguish between districts that are performing well by objective standards and those that are not. Doing anything to interfere with the successful operation of districts that are performing well by objective student-performance standards is playing with fire. The consequences of deterioration in performance resulting from such meddling can be catastrophic for the communities affected as well as for their children. Moreover, simply the prospect of such meddling can be so discouraging as to drive residents with school-age children from the district and discourage new families from moving into it. We’ve seen that already in Wilton from the mere prospect of district consolidation (with SB 738 and 454 by their terms mandating Norwalk’s and Wilton’s school districts be consolidated).

With those thoughts in mind and specifically as to SB 874, I respectfully propose that if SB 874 were to be adopted in any form (contrary to my urging here), the provisions of SB 874 at a minimum be revised explicitly to exclude from mandatory consolidation any district whose students’ performance, by specific objective measures, exceeds an explicitly stated standard. Not only would that revision comport with the objective of doing no harm but also it can provide encouragement to districts whose students fall below that standard to try to raise performance levels. What it will also crucially do is to remove the daunting specter of mandatory consolidation that is currently clouding well-performing districts such as Wilton’s as it also affirmatively encourages them to continue with their excellent student performance.

I have nothing against the state taking steps to offer non-mandatory inducements to districts to consider certain joint activities or operations where savings can be achieved, and I very much encourage the state to consider putting more resources into vocational education on a regional basis on the model of the outstanding Abbott Technical School in Danbury which I understand is regularly receiving far more applicants than it can accommodate and whose educational programs are critical to providing constant replenishment of the skilled workforce that has such an important place in our state’s economic future. I also have no objection to the state undertaking mandatory consolidations of underperforming districts, again by objective measures with results observed consistently over time and not simply based on a single year’s performance. Such districts need help, and economies of scale for really small districts achieved by consolidation may help to improve educational performance through better use of resources.

For my town of Wilton, a mandatory consolidation bill in any form is such an inflammatory issue that it is already, and will continue to be, a one-issue political subject here in town for as long as it persists in any form that adversely affects Wilton, whether as it is now or as modified -- including even in
a “study-only” form. Any of those forms of a mandatory consolidation bill or a study of this subject leaves a huge cloud of uncertainty hanging over our town for as long as this bill or any study under it persists. And I understand that this impact is being felt and reacted to in similar terms in many other towns across our state.

In a Norwalk-Wilton school-district consolidation (as but one illustration of mandatory consolidation conducted along probate court boundary lines – as several of these S.B.s propose without any apparent reflection on educational considerations), the governance issues are very challenging and likely to drag Wilton down without advancing Norwalk. Norwalk at five times Wilton’s size in population will undoubtedly dominate district decision-making. If there is to be some form of joint decision-making on a basis other than population size, what would that basis be? Our two towns in the past have taken diametrically opposed views on major matters, and we shouldn’t expect kumbaya moments in our joint governance of a school district.

How about consolidated operation on the individual school level? Are schools across both towns supposed to be physically consolidated into single buildings? If so, at what time, expense and disruption in busing students longer distances to make the physical consolidation work? By contrast, if all of the schools in the newly consolidated district are to be maintained as they are, what will be the vaunted savings from consolidation? Alternatively, are those consolidation savings supposed to come from central office cost-savings? Our Wilton district’s central office is very leanly staffed and now actually shares top leadership with our town offices on both the financial and the building-supervision sides of operations. Will those current intra-town joint staffing savings be lost as a result of consolidation, and how much can be saved by merging lean central office staffs anyway?

If this district-consolidation legislative proposal is really a not-so-subtle way of addressing educational funding issues such as those that have been the focus of state-wide equal-education litigation over multiple years now, let’s address that issue head-on, not by gumming up well-performing districts in needless and wasteful consolidations. Let’s simply be honest about what we’re doing and let that real objective be advanced instead of the crazy mandatory consolidation idea even if advanced “only” with “studies” and the like that simply serve to leave a threatening cloud of uncertainty over affected towns.

Mandatory consolidation is a one-issue subject for all of us here in Wilton and well beyond it— all across our state—and we are united here as I’ve never seen before. This will bury under it any other issue and the accomplishments of this Legislature and of the Executive Branch if it persists in the hurtful forms currently being advanced. The mandatory concept expressed in these bills needs to go away completely, and that needs to happen now and not at some unknown time in the future when the damage will have already been done as the result of ideas that have no merit either administratively or from a policy standpoint. If it is, as I expect and have noted above, a stalking horse for something else concerning educational funding, then let that something else be advanced straightforwardly, in candor and with integrity, so that it can be carefully considered and, if found to have merit, acted upon.

Respectfully,

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