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Testimony of

Jeff Leake

President, Connecticut Education Association Before the Education Committee

Governor's Bill No. 7150

AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING EDUCATION

March 1, 2019

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez and distinguished members of the Education Committee. My name is Jeff Leake, and I'm representing the members of the Connecticut Education Association. I am speaking concerning certain provisions of Governor's Bill No. 7150 that begin the transfer of responsibility for the State Teachers' Retirement System (TRS) to our cities and towns. I will also be commenting on proposals addressing regionalization of school districts.

We are fully aware of the need to right Connecticut's financial ship, but that cannot be done by expecting local governments to fund needed retirement payments into TRS, or by school communities making decisions that are only about money, and not about students and education.

Regarding the proposal to shift state teachers' retirement costs to municipalities in HB 7150, while we appreciate that this cost shift does not go to the lengths put forth by the previous administration, we know that the amounts due from local boards of education in fiscal years 2020 and 2021 are likely to grow in the years after. We also know that our polling from only two years ago clearly indicated that almost three-quarters of Connecticut voters opposed balancing the state's budget by using local property taxes, instead of state funds, to cover teacher retirement costs. We also know, from that poll, that two-thirds of voters wanted their legislators to vote against any plan that shifts costs from the state to cities and towns. Many of our towns and cities are still recovering from the financial debacle of ten years ago. Today, and in the months ahead, they will also be struggling with the effects of the new federal tax act's limit on local tax deductions, which may heighten interest in the impact of local property taxes.

If the governor and state lawmakers want to further 'smooth out' payments into the Teachers' Retirement System, we suggest placing the CT Lottery into the pension fund, a move that would reduce the state's unfunded liability and required contributions. Shifting these costs to our local communities is not the answer.

On the issue of regionalism or consolidation; I was one of the members of the Governor's transition sub-committee that discussed this issue. We were concerned about ensuring that our education system was spending each and every dollar wisely. Our discussions focused on ideas regarding back-office and administration savings and other areas to achieve efficiencies while ensuring that the interests of our students and their communities remained at the forefront of dealing with the delivery of the highest quality education services.

We welcome thorough research and discussion of what an 'optimal' school and district size might be, but we would not welcome a discussion that leads only with the goal of saving dollars. We know that students and parents want neighborhood schools at the center of their earliest education experiences, and we must recognize how valuable and comforting this is to students and their families. We also know that other considerations come into play as parents weigh the value of having access to more comprehensive curricula through regionalized secondary level schooling. The issue is complicated and we appreciate the Governor's comprehensive approach. Additionally, we urge decision makers to ensure that any proposals on this issue enhance the quality of education, avoid increasing class sizes, and ensure that educators, parents, and local leaders have a say in decisions that could impact students and their school districts.

We read with interest the OP-ED by the chairman of the Essex Board of Education and the Region 4 Supervision District regarding the road blocks to innovative and flexible school and district designs as presented below:

https://www.ctnewsjunkie.com/archives/entry/20190207_op-ed_what_prevents_towns_from_regionalizing_schools_is_red_tape/

Let's have a discussion that encompasses ideas about what is truly educationally optimal while also reviewing roadblocks currently in place.