

## **Board of Ed OKs \$98M Budget with 4.5% Increase (2.34% from Loss of State Aid)**

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The Darien Board of Education approved a 2017-2018 budget of 98,073,175, which represents a 4.5 percent increase over the budget passed last year. The removal of about \$2.1 million in state aid accounts for a 2.34 percent increase in the burden on taxpayers, and school district spending would also increase 2.16 percent.

Working until just past midnight, the board voted on the budget after a 4 1/2 hour public meeting (with a half-hour executive session before that).

The board supported the funding of two special education department chairs instead of the one originally proposed by Superintendent Dan Brenner.

One would supervise special education in the high school, the other in Middlesex Middle School. The extra

positions are expected to both replace special education faculty coordinators and ease the burden of assistant principals at both schools.

The board rejected a proposal to add more than \$100,000 to fully fund several Darien High School sports teams.

The budget also includes \$289,359 in extra costs for the high school cafeteria replacement project, which had previously been budgeted at \$1.4 million. The board voted unanimously to revise the budgeted cost upward to \$1,689,359.

During the public comment part of the agenda, early in the evening, RTM Member Jay Hardison told the Board of Education that making enough room in the cafeteria would be much less expensive if tables with benches were used rather than the smaller tables with chairs that are used now.

Removing the tiers in the floor was considered, he said, but the cost of removing the concrete under the tiered floors was \$700,000. He added that Hardison's estimate of a \$100,000 project to replace tables and chairs also didn't include any plans to reduce the noise in the room, unlike the administration's plan for the renovation.

#### **Alternative School Program: 'Fitch Academy'**

In addition to going over possible budget cuts for about two hours, the board also heard a plan for an alternative high school program, to be called the Fitch Academy. It would be housed in Darien Library (which has agreed to the idea) and be almost entirely financed by transferring funds and teaching duties within the high school budget, Brenner told the board. Only about a dozen students are expected to be part of the program in its first year.

The school district would pay the library \$24,000 to rent space for a year, and all but \$4,000 of the rent payments would come from other budget accounts (for utilities) at the high school. Assuming the program works out, it is expected to be moved elsewhere for the following school year. If successful, Brenner said, the school district in future years could even take in students from other school districts and generate revenue from it. It is unclear where a larger program would be housed.

The alternative school program officially would be part of Darien High School, using teachers that come from the high school and many of the students would go to the main campus after a time in the alternative school program.

The program would be meant for students with a lot of anxiety — not for students with significant special education needs or for students with misbehavior problems. Students with such high anxiety that they skip school because of it would be prime candidates for the program.

Board of Education members seemed supportive of the program, but they voted to put the money in a "budget control" account which would give them the option of dropping the program later, even before it

begins.

Brenner said staffing the program with the equivalent of two teachers (although there are expected to be more teachers working for part of their work week in the program) wouldn't be a problem: Under the new teachers contract, average course loads have been increased to 4.5 classes, up from an average of four classes for high school teachers, he said.

***Correction:*** An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the board added just over \$100,000 for full funding of some high school sports teams. Actually, that proposal from board member Christa McNamara was rejected.