

Board of Education Chairperson Tara Ochman's State of the Town Remarks

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Good Evening Mr. Moderator, members of the Republican Town Meeting, town officials, and the community of Darien, those here and those watching on Channel 79.

The Board of Education is charged with that most important of missions; to educate and guide our children so they become contributing members of our society.

Editor's note: This is Board of Education Chairperson Tara Ochman's State of the Town speech, delivered (along with speeches from three other town officials) Monday night to the Representative Town Meeting. We think the full speech provides readers with an insight into town issues. This is the text of the speech as sent to Darienite.com on Tuesday. Speech texts often differ in very minor ways from the spoken remarks, which will be rebroadcast by Darien TV79 on cable television and, later, on [Vimeo](#).

It carries the enormous weight of delivering educational needs inside of fiscally responsible budgets. This is an all-important balance to strike. As we look back on how we have managed this past year, and we look to the future, it is fair to conclude the Board of Education and the Town of Darien are dedicated to our children and their opportunities in the future

We have much to be proud of, 95.8 percent of our students chose to pursue higher education after graduating

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Darien High School. For those students who chose another route, we are able to offer guidance and counseling to help meet their needs. We continue to recognize the important need to reach our students on many levels, recognizing diversity in talents and interests.

Our Arts department has received accolades across disciplines; there were 17 nominations for HALO awards for our theatre students, multiple choral and instrumental awards, and visual arts students were selected to show at The Bruce Museum.

Darien High School earned a charter to open a chapter of the Mu Alpha Theta Mathematics National Honor Society. Our Model Congress and UN clubs continue to achieve with student wins at Yale just last week, and our DECA business club has grown to one of our largest groups, with 11 students placing in the top three of their categories last year.

Our students along with the support of the administration and their teachers once again competed at a college level competition to design a car powered by fuel cell, travelled to China, participated in days of coding, and secured hundreds of internships high school seniors.

Our Athletics program is first class, with FCIAC, and State Championships to celebrate.

The Board of Education also held its first night games under the lights this fall -- including our first playoff game — creating not only a student-centered activity but a community gathering place for all to enjoy. We, once again, thank all the private and public organizations who helped us make this a reality.

Our enrollment this year is approximately 4800 students. We continue to monitor our numbers using several models to anticipate growth.

The Darien school system has always attracted families to our Town. New developments are expected to have beneficial ripple effects throughout the community, but do make it hard to predict growth patterns with certainty. The District appreciates that it will need to adjust and address the associated educational and facility needs as these developments become a reality.

Enrollment numbers naturally drive school capacity conversations, coupled with building longevity concerns.

Our administration has become adept at managing class sections and neighborhood schools.

They have converted rooms, changed out locker pods and recognized the importance of learning as it relates to class size. Still, we have school facilities in need of attention.

The Board will continue the important conversations regarding major projects and projections. We recognize the desire to plan in a timely fashion to capture optimal bonding opportunities.

When we come to the Town for support on capital initiatives we will do so with sound thought and theory.

We look forward to engaging you in a thoughtful dialogue.

Thoughtful conversations also continue around enrollment growth, and its impact on educational sectors; examining the associated costs is a responsibility we take very seriously.

Oftentimes the cost of special education is discussed. Across Fairfield County Special Education identification percentages are rising above historical averages. Serving children with identified needs is federally mandated, and state funding formulas have become uncertain at best. The Board recognizes the obligation of these mandates and is committed to serving all children of Darien.

We have and will continue to find the best way to manage costs while always putting the needs of our students first.

Finding ways to best meet student's need is directly seen in the town decision to invest in Department Chairs this year. The District recognized that there was a need to ensure consistency in the delivery of curriculum across disciplines, as well as sequential curriculum planning throughout grades 6-12.

This may seem a simple task, but the level of coordination to manage these departments with our population of teachers and students is immense. We have been pleased with the reports made to the Board so far, and look forward to continuing updates throughout the year.

Lastly one of the great success of this year, the Fitch Academy, offers us all a powerful lesson going forward.

The Academy began as an idea from our administration. They identified students in need, and created a plan to address the concern. The Board understood the vision and the potential to support our children in a new, and important way.

We pushed to make sure that we could create a program that was effectual and practical. The Darien Library, stepped up to provide a home for the Academy in its pilot year.

It was backed by the Board of Finance, and, you, the RTM, in your vote to support the budget.

Much has been written about Fitch and many formal updates have been provided, but no feedback has been more valuable then to hear from those most affected by our decision to try something different:

“You gave me my child back.”

“The benefit these children are receiving will be life altering as they navigate their journey through high school.”

“My child feels valued and safe.”

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There should be nothing more gratifying to anyone in public service than to hear this type of feedback; and it happened because we all took a leap of faith together. We reasoned, we questioned, we debated; but in the end, we worked together to make it happen.

With the uncertainty in Hartford, a call for solutions is paramount. By staying open to new ideas, we can break stale paradigms and find new ways to enhance our children's education while capitalizing on wise fiscal opportunities.

By respecting roles and remaining within the processes outlined in the Town Charter and by State law we can create success that is healthy, constructive, and collaborative

Personally, I would like to thank, the School Administration under the leadership of Dr. Daniel Brenner; and, my fellow board members; Betsy Hagerty-Ross, Katie Stein, Duke Dineen, Michael Burke, Christa McNamara, and Jill McCammon. We welcome Debra Ritchie and Dennis Maroney as the newest members of our Board.

I would be remiss if I did not thank Michael Harman, our former chairman for everything he has done for our Board and our Town.

There is an amazing amount of work that goes into being on the Board of Education. It is incredibly time consuming and rife with difficult decisions but, that is also what makes it the best kind of work.

The Board and the Administration are dedicated to providing an excellent public education to the school children of Darien.

We believe that schools exist for children and we look for your support as we continue chart this course forward.

On behalf of the Darien Board of Education, we wish you and your families very happy holiday season, and a healthy New Year.