Full Statement: Teachers Union President States Objections to Plan for Department Chairs

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Categories : Education

Tagged as : Board of Education 2017, Darien Education Association 2017, Darien Public Schools 2017

Date : February 16, 2017

Joslyn DeLancey, an elementary school teacher and president of the Darien Education Association, spoke to the Board of Educaton on Jan. 10, giving the teacher union's reaction to Superintendent of Schools Dan Brenner's proposal for six new academic department chairs for the high school and middle school.

(Since then, a second department chair for special education has been added to the proposal, bringing the total to seven.)

Here is DeLancey's full statement to the board, which was included in the Feb. 14 packet to board members*, along with the minutes of that meeting (a video including her comments is beneath the statement):*

Hello, my name is Joslyn DeLancey. I am the president of the Darien Education Association, and am here to speak on behalf of the teachers of Darien regarding Dr. Brenner’s proposal to shift the middle school and

high school department chairs and coordinators to administrative positions.

As an elementary school teacher — you should know that this change in structure does not have a direct impact on me, my practice, or my classroom. As the president of our teachers' local bargaining unit, I feel it my obligation to speak to you, and to give you insight on the teachers' thoughts, concerns, and feedback regarding a change that will have a direct impact on nearly 250 of our members.

Before I begin to explain the teachers' stance on this topic, I first have to thank Dr. Brenner for his ongoing dialogue and willingness to be collaborative with the DEA.

While considering the proposal Dr. Brenner reached out to DEA leadership, explained the changes, and even tried to work out a new position that might be able to incorporate members of our bargaining unit.

Due to conflicts of interest regarding teachers evaluating teachers, we could not work out a position that worked for both parties, and so we find ourselves at this juncture, where Dr. Brenner has decided to shift positions that have resided in the teachers' bargaining unit over to an administrative position.

Dr. Brenner has been open to explaining this new role to teachers and listening to our concerns. He has met with teachers of all departments at both the middle school and the high school. The DEA recognizes this effort, and acknowledges that we are lucky to have this collaborative dialogue and work with our leadership at Central Office.

That being said, I would be remiss if I did not address the teachers concerns with the Darien Board of Education. This is a change that will have a tremendous impact on our teachers, and it will also cost The Board a significant amount of money.

It is our understanding that Dr. Brenner had two primary goals when proposing the administrative department chair positions. The first was to achieve articulation on the curriculum work done within departments.

This would allow for stronger cohesion and would ensure that students in and across disciplines would receive similar experiences within the classroom. The other goal was to strengthen our teacher evaluation system by having administrators who are skilled and knowledgeable in a given content area evaluating teachers in that content area.

Please recognize that the DEA is, of course, in favor of stronger articulation in grades 6-12 as well as encouraging a teacher evaluation system that supports teacher growth and allows for feedback that both strengthens a teacher's classroom management and environment yet also strengthens a teacher's ability to deliver high and rigorous content knowledge.

The disagreement resides that while some teachers agree with Dr. Brenner's approach to achieve these goals, there are many other teachers who believe these goals can be achieved in another way.

There is voice in the DEA that supports Dr. Brenner's move to make these positions administrative. One reason some teachers are in favor of these positions is because we could potentially have stronger leadership to help teachers grow as professionals and are, as Dr. Brenner has put it, "critical friends" of the departments.

The other is that many teachers find the prospect a greater leadership opportunity, an exciting motivator to continue to work in Darien and still be able to gain leadership experience.

Just as there are teachers who support this shift, there are many teachers who feel that Dr. Brenner's goals could be met within our current model. They also have great concerns about this critical change. These concerns are not based in a resistance to change — nor are they an avoidance of having new leadership.

I would only come to you with these concerns if I thought that they were valid, and if they spoke to a critical mass of teachers throughout both the middle school and high school.

The first and probably most basic concern is that there are currently 12 teachers who hold department chair and coordinator positions. There are only six potential administrative slots.

This means that teachers who have been committed to the district for many years will potentially lose their stipends and their leadership role. Some of these educators have spent years committing to Darien, building up relationships with teachers, parents and administrators, and have established strong networks within their respective buildings.

At max, only six of these trusted colleagues have the potential to rise up to a leadership position. This means that at least 6 of these educators will have to find other ways to utilize their leadership abilities. The tremendous growth and success that they have given to the schools and the students will be lost — and even more, the leadership abilities of these people could go untapped.

A great concern that teachers have is that the shift to administrative roles, leaves voids in the work that is currently performed in each building. Currently, each department has a chair or coordinator accessible all day long. This means that at any time before, during, or after the school day teachers, parents, and most importantly students have access to their department leaders.

Department chairs and coordinators help with placement issues, sub coverage, parental concerns, mediate between colleagues, and help with a number of other issues and concerns throughout the day.

Under Dr. Brenner's new model, the chair or coordinator will only be directly accessible to each building for half of the day. To many DEA members, this would be a huge loss for both teachers and students.

Another concern is that Dr. Brenner has it slated that the new administrators will be teaching one class. This class will alternate year to year between the high school and the middle school. Teachers are concerned about the lack of consistency. They are also concerned about what happens to the other teacher who teaches that class in the alternate years.

We understand and appreciate Dr. Brenner's desire to keep these administrators connected to the classroom, but do not think that teaching one class will lend itself to the amount of work these administrators will have when it comes to designing, modifying, building curriculum, meeting with departments, evaluating teachers, and any other responsibilities that might fall on them.

We have very strong teachers in Darien. Many of them have grown up in this system and have a great sense of pride for the work we do, and are not afraid to grow and change with the times, but want to honor our culture and history as well.

Many other teachers are ones that have fled from other districts because they knew that Darien was a place that embraced professionals and gave great opportunities for teachers on their journeys to supporting kids in classes. Some teachers that have come from other districts have experienced this administrative model.

They have seen a model that is ineffective — and that has resulted in a top-down bully approach, where these new administrators use this particular position to push their leadership agenda, and make choices that push the administrator forward without considering the best interest's of the programs or the students. As I read in the paper this morning — the budget has proposed that this agenda item will add an additional cost of over $250,000 to the district, I believe that this is a true account to the new costs.

While the projected extra cost to the budget is $250,000, if you look at the proposed salaries, the actual cost of these positions will be over $600,000. What is lost at the classroom teacher level in order to account for the district spending close $400,000 that was already budgeted elsewhere and is now being dedicated to these new positions?

The teachers feel that there are a lot of other ways that this money could be used to support our students in the classrooms as well as build the articulation that Dr. Brenner is seeking.

Currently, we have two department chairs/coordinators for each subject area. These professionals are skilled and knowledgeable in the traits and needs of the very different buildings.

Could this money be used to have them get release time to meet together to discuss needs and build articulation?

Could teachers get release time to visit other classrooms and observe master teachers?

If Dr. Brenner is seeking more evaluators, would this money be better served on an additional AP for each building, or a student dean who can manage behaviors so that administrators can give support to teachers in terms of stronger evaluations?

This would cost only two to three positions rather than six.

There are many more concerns that have been addressed in terms of establishing administrative positions to

replace the current department chairs and coordinators. The ones that I have listed are the most pressing.

I bring these to your attention in order for you to reconsider whether or not this change is truly the best option for our district. Should you choose to accept this item for next year's budget — we hope that you and Dr. Brenner will take the DEA concerns into consideration while building the framework for these positions.

We want to ensure that we have a model that encourages teacher and student growth, but that also celebrates the great work and successes of both our teachers and our students.

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In this video of the Jan. 10 Board of Education meeting, DeLancey reads her statement on behalf of the union, starting at about 1 minute, 30 seconds into the recording:

Board of Education 1-10-17 from Darien TV79 on Vimeo.

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Editor's note: *Darienite.com typically changes paragraph breaks, typographical errors and usually changes texts to conform to our in-house style guidelines, but doesn't change wording in written texts unless it's to correct a grammatical error. If part of the text is omitted, a "[...]" will show where.*