

Special Education Parents Statements at the Public Hearing on the Schools Budget: PART 4

Author : David Gurliacci

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The Special Education Parent Advisory Committee addressed the Board of Education with two statements on Thursday, at the board's public hearing on the 2017-2018 education budget:

FIRST STATEMENT

Good evening we are Courtney Darby and Tricia Bresnahan, co-chairs of the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee, SEPAC, and Kelly Dupont, Linda Straubel and Wendy Hopper, SEPAC representatives.

We would like to thank Shirley Klein, Scott McCarthy and Dr. Brenner and other school administrators for working collaboratively with our committee to hear the concerns of all Darien parents – and to help all students learn effectively.

We would also like to thank the many educators and administrators who work tirelessly and effectively to help our students achieve their potential.

We are relaying the concerns and input we have received from many parents in the district.

Composite Students

In order to get a true sense of challenges kids face but protect student privacy, we will start with three composite students who share similarities with many students in our district but are not one student in particular.

Meet Jack

Jack is 9 years old and in 4th grade. He is reading at a 2nd grade level and making minimal progress. His classmates ask him why he is reading books that they read when they were “little.”

Meet Sarah

Sarah is 11 years old and in 6th grade. She has been behind her peers academically for years. Sarah was not identified with a learning disability until the end of 3rd grade – and because she could not catch up she had to leave all of her friends after 5th grade to attend a new school. Sarah would rather attend school in her own town and be with her friends. She worries constantly if she will ever be able to come back.

FULL COVERAGE of the Board of Education public hearing:

[Topics at Education Budget Hearing: DHS Cafeteria, Dept Chairs, Guidance Counselors](#)

[Council of Darien School Parents: Budget Statements at the Board of Ed Public Hearing: **PART 1**](#)

[Budget Statements on High School, Middle School at the Board of Ed Public Hearing: **PART 2**](#)

[Elementary School PTO Statements on the Budget at the Board of Ed Public Hearing: **PART 3**](#)

Special Education Parents Statements at the Public Hearing on the Schools Budget: **PART 4**

Meet Andrew

Andrew is 15 years old and in 10th grade. He has a hard time talking to peers and teachers. Andrew struggles with the vast amount of content he is expected to learn. He has been told that he is responsible for scheduling tests in alternate settings or talking to his teachers about his IEP modifications and accommodations. Some teachers seem to understand that he learns differently, but some make him consistently ask for notes and study guides for every test and assignment. Many times he gets these study guides late, which makes him even more anxious and leaves him with less time to study or accomplish assignments.

Support for Four Main Areas

Tonight we are here to show support for four main areas in the budget. At the same time we are asking for greater transparency and detail in these budget areas.

(1) Professional Development

We'd like to express our support for Clearly Spelled Out Professional Development in Reading, Writing, Assistive Technology and Co-Teaching

Reading

High rates of outplacement for reading disabilities and students who are still struggling in late elementary school indicate that it is important to gain a better understanding of reading resources — in particular Orton Gillingham and Wilson training.

Parents need answers to the following questions: At each school -- How many special education teachers — and general education teachers — have been trained in OG? How many have been trained in Wilson? How long does a child try one program before moving to another? How many students are using each approach? And what is the data on how successful these reading programs have been in helping students progress and close the gap?

We need to invest in highly effective specialized reading instruction or else we will continue to pay significant dollars in outplacement.

Writing

Writing is a multifaceted task that requires the coordination of many skills and cognitive processes. Due to this complex process – many students, including those with learning disabilities, find writing challenging. The current reader's and writer's workshop model does not provide the specialized instruction needed. These students require explicit, evidence-based instruction in writing. We urge the district to invest in professional development on research-based writing programs.

Assistive Technology

At a recent SEPAC meeting, Lori Ritvo and Christina Stauble, district Assistive Technology Coordinators and Special Education Speech and Language Pathologists, presented to a large crowd of parents an array of assistive technology tools that could help students better access the curriculum.

Parents were excited to learn about these AT features to help struggling students, however they were also frustrated that many teachers are not aware or well-trained in these tools — and that students are also not given adequate training or time to learn the tools.

We are excited about the roll out of the 1 to 1 devices, but hope that all students will be trained to use these devices to the best of their ability. Currently expertise resides in pockets throughout the district and the manpower and time for training are lacking. We ask the district to devote sufficient professional development and manpower to assistive technology.

Co-taught classes

We support and are excited about the professional development being given by Marilyn Friend in the co-taught teaching model at the high school this year. We were encouraged to hear she will work with the middle school next year. We urge you to include the elementary level at the same time. The access to co-teaching at the elementary school is uneven, and many students could potentially benefit from this model. It also makes sense to adequately train teachers before assessing the model's effectiveness.

(2) Support for 2 Guidance Counselors (MMS & DHS)

We would like to express our support for two new guidance counselors — one at Middlesex Middle School and one at Darien High School. School guidance counselors are often the first line of defense when it comes to mental health issues.

Just two weeks ago, more than 130 parents attended a presentation by the Child Mind Institute to learn how to better address student anxiety and worries. Research shows that anxiety disorders affect one in eight children and that untreated students are at higher risk of performing poorly in school, missing out on important social experiences, and engaging in substance abuse.

An adequate number of guidance professionals at the middle and high school levels would provide an important safety net for this vulnerable population. We can't defer this need to a part-time schedule.

In addition, when searching for a new high school guidance counselor, we urge the district to consider a professional who also has expertise in secondary transition, which is required for all students with IEPs after the age of 15.

(3) Support for full-time psychologist at DHS

We support the budget request for an additional .5 psychologist at DHS. The

position plays a critical role in addressing a range of mental health issues in high school students. In addition, this full-time position is needed to provide careful evaluation and testing expertise.

(4) Support for Two Special Education Department Chairs (MMS & DHS)

We'd like to express our support for two (not just one as proposed) school-based Special Education Department Chairs for MMS & DHS.

The budget book explains that the main role of the six department chairs is "to ensure a consistent vertical curriculum" "across all curriculum areas." The problem with the special education chair is that there is not a "consistent vertical curriculum" grades 6-12. The role is really about overseeing appropriate access to the curriculum.

If we take a moment to consider the role of the department chair for science — grades 6-12 — we are asking this person to be an expert and supervisor in an expansive range of topics — from parts of the body, to meiosis & mitosis, to the thermodynamic cycle. This involves hundreds of pages of curriculum oversight & supervision — it is not a small task.

So keep in mind, we are asking the Special Education Department chair to provide access to this same expansive curriculum. Simultaneously, they need to provide careful oversight in accessing the curriculum in English, Math, Social Studies, Foreign Language, and if necessary, electives.

If anyone has ever tried to help a child with Biology or Algebra II homework after not seeing the course material for many years — you understand that you can't just jump in and supervise. To help a student you must first understand the subject material.

We need school-based Special Education Department Chairs at DHS and MMS. A department chair is not going to be effective at training, articulation and supervision unless they are well versed in ensuring appropriate access to the curriculum at each grade level and in each subject.

Alternative School

We agree with the need to address the mental health needs of all of Darien's students. We look forward to hearing more about the plan for the alternative school. We also hope that the needs of our current high school and the space needs of all of our schools are our top priority.

[Board of Education - Budget Public Hearing 2-2-17](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).

SECOND STATEMENT

Hi. My name is Wendy Hopper and I am speaking to you as a parent of three Darien students, one of whom is dyslexic. I became a member of SEPAC to help educate myself on what our district offers the dyslexic population, as well as to advocate for more robust early intervention for students with reading difficulties.

My understanding is that Darien has one of the highest populations attending Windward, in addition to the number of students who go to Eagle Hill and other schools, or leave school to receive intensive tutoring at Lindamood-Bell.

Most parents I speak with want to keep their child in their neighborhood school with their siblings, friends and time for afterschool activities. So why do they leave? Often they leave because the school cannot meet their child's needs OR because their child's learning difference was caught too late and they needed more intervention.

Financially, this places a large burden on families, as well as the district through outplacement and litigation.

We are a district with many talented, experienced and well-educated teachers and administrators, and I have seen many administrative improvements, including the addition of SESS facilitators in our buildings and the implementation of Foundations in the early grades.

But I want to share with you that if you are the parent of a child with a learning difference, you need to work twice as hard to make sure that your child is receiving the services they need to be successful and to start closing the gap.

I am concerned that what we currently provide in data collection and Progress Monitoring — Early Intervention using Orton-Gillingham based reading instruction and Teacher Training — is still not enough.

I often hear parents say that their classroom teacher does not notice anything or thinks that their child is making enough progress, only to find out several years later that their child has fallen behind.

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I don't think that teachers are neglectful; most are well-meaning, so I think it comes from a genuine feeling of wanting the child to be successful. So how can our district support teachers in identifying "at risk" students and providing appropriate early intervention and communication with parents?

I also hear parents say that teachers don't really understand dyslexia, and to be fair, it is complicated and challenging to understand. I am in full support of the district's training in Orton-Gillingham based reading instruction for all special education and general education classroom teachers, as it will provide an understanding of reading differences and give teachers tools to offer students during reading and writing lessons.

Finally, data collection and Progress Monitoring. What does the district have in place to monitor student's progress that is consistent across the district, informs instruction and helps parents understand where their child is compared to their grade-level peers?

My hope is that the district can create a system where struggling readers are identified early, are given appropriate intervention, that data is collected to inform instruction and a child's progress is monitored closely to ensure that the gap is closing.

In the ideal situation, a parent does not need to ask for these things and teachers do not need to reinvent the wheel.

Thank you for your time and your efforts toward improving Special Education services for struggling readers in Darien. I understand that change is a process and I thank you for the positive changes that are in place and look forward to seeing where we can go.