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Board of Ed Chairman's State of Town Speech: Schools Will Need More Space

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The Darien High School building, constructed and opened just 10 years ago, is expected to become too small for the student population, new Board of Education Chairman Michael Harman told the Representative Town Meeting on Monday.

"Darien High School (DHS) is again facing classroom space concerns as enrollment moves closer to the maximum building capacity of 1,400 students, a number which is forecasted to be exceeded in 2018," Harman said in his speech, one of four "State of the Town" speeches given Monday night.

The town's elementary school population will also need more classroom space, Harman said: "At present, the

district has very limited capacity to accommodate any future growth, without attempting to address either elementary class size policy or use of aging portables."

That means the school district will have to build more classroom space or use "temporary" portable classes, he said: "[A]ll indications are that any recommended course of action could entail some type of facilities project and/or significant capital expenditure.

STATE OF THE TOWN SPEECHES: Full texts and descriptions on Darienite.com:

- [Expect to Get More Housing, Retail Options, Says Stevenson in 'State of Town' Address](#)
- [Finance Board Chairman Expects a Higher Tax Rate Increase Than Last Year's 2.5%](#)
- [Planning & Zoning Chair: Decisions on New Housing, 'Unprecedented' Commercial Development Coming in 2016](#)

In September 2014, the Board of Education hired consultants to study district space needs. A report with recommendations is due to go before the board in January.

In their "State of the Town" speeches, First Selectman Jayme Stevenson and Board of Finance Chair Jon Zagrodzky each indicated they would be supportive of capital projects needed by the school district.

FULL TEXT: HARMAN'S SPEECH

Here's the complete text of the "State of the Town" speech given by Harman (we've made minor editorial style changes, including boldfacing some words, and added subheadings):

Good evening, Madame Moderator, members of the RTM, fellow elected officials and the Town of Darien. I rise to speak to you as the new chairman of the Board of Education and on behalf of my colleagues on the Darien Board of Education (BOE); I welcome the opportunity to update our community on the changes that have been taking place in the past year, in the Darien Public Schools.

At the end of the past school year, the district transitioned leadership from Interim Superintendent Dr. Lynne Pierson to our new Superintendent, Dr. Dan Brenner. Dr. Brenner comes to our district from the Roslyn Public Schools in New York, where he was superintendent of schools since 2009. Dr. Brenner is an honors graduate of Tufts University, and earned both his master's degree and Ph.D. from Hofstra University.

Dr. Brenner arrived in Roslyn in July of 2005 as the assistant superintendent of curriculum, instruction and technology shortly after a terrible scandal over financial matters.

Together with his team, Dr. Brenner successfully regained the trust of the community while building academic programs, rehabilitating neglected buildings, facilitating the passage of school budgets that supported creative educational initiatives and working collaboratively with the Board of Education and the entire school community.

In short order, the transition continued with the District also hiring the following permanent central office administrative employees:

* Ms. Shirley Klein, assistant superintendent of special education and student services

* Ms. Marjorie Cion, director of human resources

* Dr. Susie Da Silva, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction

* And most recently, Dr. Scott McCarthy, program director, K-12, special education and student services (SESS)

Even though the new administration has been in the district for just a few months, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight what has been accomplished by building on the foundation that our Interim administrators had put in place.

Building Relationships Between the District and the Rest of the Town

The most logical place to start is community relationships, an area that in times of transition never can get enough attention. Our new superintendent has sought to enhance the relationships with local governments and entities, and has probably met with most town and school organizations at least once.

The administration has embraced a dialogue with the parents through curriculum newsletters, information sessions, the News of the Week e-mail blasts (which highlight school activities), and the new district website with its increased presence including more pictures, and even including a “Whom Do I Contact?” flow chart.

Lest we forget, the Board of Education’s first focus is excellence in our educational system for the children of Darien and the administration is unwavering in its commitment to all of our students’ academic, social and behavioral success.

Management and Planning

Special education has been a major area of discussion this past year, and the cadence of improvements has continued through this transition with little interruption. From a financial side, there has been heightened

accountability for excess cost students.

The district is continuing to move beyond compliance and focusing on BEST practices: costs are to be accurately reflected in our budget, and how costs are allocated can easily be tracked by student and service in part with the use of EasyTrac software.

But a more fundamental change has been the focus on increasing communications: Weekly calls are made to homes at the secondary level from case managers and/or administrators, an increased emphasis on structure of PPT's, and just as important a significant increase in **professional development, or PD**, for all staff members involved in the PPT process.

[RTM - State of the Town 12-7-15](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).

A key tenet for the administration is the importance of PD, and moving beyond the consideration of PD as a nice to have, but understanding it is an investment in the future of the district.

Just as critical as PD is the concept of planning, implementing and monitoring new programs. At the high school, the administration is evaluating new ways for the delivery of 200/300/400 level classes. Team teaching and lab classes that support ELA, math and social studies are being piloted and the results will be used to develop future options to improve the efficiency and efficacy of instructional methods.

Special Education and General Education

Special education and general education cannot be viewed as two distinct programs, but need to complement each other, and a key link in that effort has been reinvigorating **SRBI (scientifically research-based interventions)**.

SRBI is a tiered intervention program in our general education classes: from Tier 1 (classroom level, differentiated instruction with progress monitoring), to Tier 2 (support level program with increased level of frequency, and smaller teacher to student ratio) to Tier 3 (support level instruction with increased frequency, and reduced ratio of teacher to student).

The program requires processes and protocols to ensure consistency across schools and the district, and PD is being used to develop and support the SRBI structure.

In general education, the administration is rolling out of a normed universal screener across K-8 in reading and math to allow short snapshot tests for quick assessments.

The administration has restructured the positions of math and literacy coordinators, raising these to an administrative level, and giving them supervisory and evaluator responsibility to build the capacity of the

district's math and reading interventionists, with responsibility to build and support curriculum across K-5, and plan the required PD.

Common core and alignment to **Common Core Content Standards (CCCS)** have been an ongoing major focus of the district's curriculum review. The reading/writing units of study are aligned to CCCS, and Teachers College, Columbia University PD has been increased. However, now administrators are a part of the work through Principal Academies at Teachers College.

The mathematics program review is in place and the administration is building up our teachers' capacity and ownership of math practices and curriculum. A basic goal is to achieve coordination among grade levels across all domains.

Learning with Technology

With regard to technology, the new **Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC)** test administration for Grades 3 through 8, and 11th was a success both in the administration of the new electronic test format as well as the results that our students achieved.

One of the proposed budget initiatives that the superintendent has already revealed is a greater integration of technology into the curriculum and teaching that takes place in the classrooms. The vision would be for Darien to become a 1:1 school district, grades 5-12 over the next 3 years.

It would include optimizing the use of Chromebooks (which the district was required to use for SBAC testing) and to create a sustainable model where teachers lead PD. If the district wants to develop 21st century skills, those must include technology and digital citizenship.

Student Population Going Up

The district still faces a number of challenges but I want to highlight a particular concern regarding facilities. The official Oct. 1, 2015 enrollment, including the ELP Pre-Kindergarten program, was 4,847 students, a decrease of 52 students this year; but for 2016-17, the current projection has another increase of 10 students.

However, total enrollment does not tell the whole story. Elementary classroom capacity remains an issue, with the number of sections at our elementary schools at the current level of 117. In 2016, Middlesex Middle School (MMS) is forecast to see a slight enrollment decrease to 1,147, but Darien High School (DHS) is again facing classroom space concerns as enrollment moves closer to the maximum building capacity of 1,400 students, a number which is forecasted to be exceeded in 2018.

Study of School Space Needs

Back in September 2014, the Board engaged Milone and MacBroom to conduct a school facility utilization plan to determine the existing and future facility needs of the district.

The study included a thorough analysis of our enrollment projections, taking into account the declining in-town birth rate, an increasing move-in rate, and the redevelopment of properties such as Kensett and Noroton Heights.

This analysis helped to give the previous persistence-based projections more robustness; but in the short-time since that study, several new developments that have the potential to impact the student population have been mentioned.

The follow-up study regarding facility utilization raised classroom concerns at the elementary schools, team structure limitation at MMS, current cafeteria capacity constraints and future classroom requirements at DHS.

At present, the district has very limited capacity to accommodate any future growth, without attempting to address either elementary class size policy or use of aging portables.

The final presentation of the study including any suggested course of action and indicative costs was to be presented at tomorrow's Board of Education meeting but has now been postponed to January.

However, all indications are that any recommended course of action could entail some type of facilities project and/or significant capital expenditure.

Budgeting

The Board of Education thanks the RTM and our community for supporting our school budget every year.

The administration was successful in implementing a new zero-based budgeting philosophy last year, and this year's superintendent's budget will build on the experience gained.

However, there will be a change in the BoE budget calendar this year; the budget season will start on Jan. 5 but instead of meeting on weekday evenings throughout January, the Board will review the full budget book on Saturday, Jan. 9 (snow-date Jan. 23) including a discussion of all RCs and Q&A sessions.

The Darien Board of Education invites all RTM members and elected officials to join us at 35 Leroy to hear first-hand our school district leaders explain their financial requests for the 2016-2017 school year. The Board of Education hopes the community shares our commitment to support what we value.

Thank You

On behalf of the Board of Education, we would like to thank and acknowledge a number of people:

The Board extends a special thanks to all our parents, volunteers, and donors who contribute so much to our children and to our schools. As we have moved through this last year, the support of our community, the

RTM and Town officials have helped the District continue to move in a positive direction.

The Board would like to thank the staff at our schools and our Central office. We entrust our children to them every day and we need to acknowledge the outstanding job they do in educating the young people of Darien.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to Dr. Lynne Pierson, our former interim superintendent, who helped revitalize our schools and staff during a trying period and helped set the stage for our new Administration.

We would like to acknowledge the Darien Athletic Foundation. The completion of the Center Oval at Darien High School has been an iconic addition to the campus, and the new Upper Oval turf field and Lower Oval grass fields are significant additions to support both High School and Youth Athletics. The Board thanks the DAF for their generosity and hopes to continue the successful partnership with the Administration.

Personally, I want to thank my fellow Board members: Vice Chair, Mrs. Betsy Hagerty-Ross, Secretary, Mrs. Sarah Schneider-Zuro, Mr. Michael Burke, Mr. David Dineen, Mr. Dave Martens, Mrs. Christa McNamara, Mrs. Katie Stein, and Mrs. Callie Sullivan.

It is a privilege to work with this group of volunteers. This Board has been challenged over the past two years but continues to have the well-being and education of Darien's children at the heart of every decision it makes.

To Parents

To the parents of all Darien Public School children: the Board of Education and the administrative team are making significant strides to move the district forward. One of the goals of our Board of Education and our Administrative team is excellence in our educational system for the children of Darien. Our schools exist for our children and the Board expects everyone involved to have our children's best interests at the forefront of their minds.

Finally, on behalf of the Darien Board of Education, we wish you and your families a joyous holiday season, and a healthy and prosperous New Year.