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## **Board of Education Chairperson Tara Ochman's State of the Town Address**

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*Here's the text of Darien Board of Education Chairperson Tara Ochman's "State of the Town" address, as prepared, one of several delivered Monday night to the Representative Town Meeting:*

Mr. Moderator, members of the RTM, and the community of Darien. I am honored to stand here before you to tonight on behalf of the Board of Education to update you on our work.

This discussion really begins in previous budget years. We all spend hours of time creating a plan for Darien, balancing needs, having critical conversations and believing in what Darien is, and can be.

As a board, we believe that education is the key to preparing our children to participate in their future and we are steadfast in the belief that an educated society leads to the betterment of society.

It is with that dedication to students, that each morning the Darien Public Schools welcome just over 4,600 children. Our qualified staff works to identify where each student is educationally and challenges them to grow throughout the year so that they can achieve their dreams.

### **Important Initiatives in the Past Year**

This is not a simple task, and each year we learn and adjust to be better able to serve our students and, in turn, serve our community.

Specifically, this year, your support has allowed us to further a variety of important initiatives.

**Safety and security upgrades** have been made at many schools. **New entrances** have been installed at Holmes and Middlesex schools. Additional **cameras** have been installed to help provide greater surveillance capability for the district and more rapid communication with the police in case of any emergency.

Our **emergency blue light system** is fully operational at all schools.

The **re-turfing of the baseball field** is almost complete and will allow for a variety of student activities to take place on a safe and well maintained field.

Soon you will see the addition of **solar panels** on many of our school buildings, bringing with them an estimated \$1 million dollars of savings over the next 10 years.

And while now in the hands of the Board of Selectman, I would be remiss not to note the good work and thorough conversations involved so far in the **building project for a new Ox Ridge School**. This is an aged facility with failing systems, and I believe the project that will come forward is something of which we will all be proud.

Our department chairpersons and elementary directors continue to work to **align teaching and learning best practices** across classrooms. This includes responding with curriculum adjustments in an ever-evolving world, and is based on student data.

These vital personnel are able to ensure curriculum is developmentally appropriate and is standards-based. Moreover, they have been given the freedom and time to write unique and innovative curriculum that adheres to state standards but represents Darien's own commitment to excellence in education.

We have been able to capture economies of scale and **accelerate our technology plan** so that Grades 5 to 12 are now all part of our 1:1 technology initiative.

Our students have engaged in **digital citizenry workshops**, to understand the power of accessing technology and the responsibility that such access brings.

The board and the district recognize that students must be prepared for a world that will demand a certain amount of technological expertise; but we are equally committed to **civics and civility** as they engage in this new world.

### **Social Emotional Learning**

We also acknowledge the necessity for [Social Emotional learning](#) in our schools. This is not unique to Darien. Towns across the state are experiencing a similar need, but through the hard work of our dedicated staff we have been able to develop a curriculum that is tailored to the specific needs we are seeing here in Darien.

Programs like this were not traditionally codified in schools but they are now a reality. As one neighboring school official said recently, schools are now one of the major mental health providers in the state.

This is a complex task to undertake. So far, with effective and strong leadership at the district and school levels, we have been able to manage this emerging need within our budgets. But, if I were to signal to the town where I see requests for future investment, this is a growth area to which we need to pay attention.

### **Students**

No State of the Town [address] would be complete without mentioning the amazing work of our students this year.

Once again we have seen accomplishments in the arts and academics, success in sports and music, and achievements in our after school clubs and honor societies. We are proud to offer a wide variety of activities to engage interested students.

We celebrate their successes and are proud of their achievements.

### **Essential Questions**

And, as a board, all that our students experience leads us back to essential questions:

—Have we invested in our children as learners so they believe they should invest in themselves?

—Have the exams and homework, wins and losses, performances, conferences and concerts taught them to be active in their own education?

—While important, independent of GPA [grade-point average], test scores, acceptances, deferrals, or denials, have they learned that as long as they choose to continue to learn, they will find their way?

Answering these questions is the work we love and believe in. This is what drives our partnership with you

as elected officials and neighbors.

### **Thanks**

I would like to recognize each member of the BOE for engaging the community and listening to differing viewpoints, for never succumbing to those looking to destroy, and for always trying to rise to the occasion.

I would also thank Dr. Elliott Landon who took on the arduous task of interim superintendent. We are fortunate he is committed to keeping Darien moving forward, because as you all know, our children never cease nor pause.

And, thanks to all our central office and building level staff for being committed to Darien and its learners, believing consistently in providing outstanding educational experiences for all.

Finally, we thank you, the RTM, BOF [Representative Town Meeting, Board of Finance] and the Town of Darien for your support. We look forward to continuing our important work with you in the future.

We wish you all a very happy holiday season and a prosperous New Year.

*Editor's note: Darienite.com added subheadings and made minor changes to reflect this publication's editorial style.*

[RTM - State of The Town 12-10-18](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).