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Brenner: Fitch Academy, with 11 Students, Already Saving Town \$150K to \$175K

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With 11 high school students from town getting taught in the Fitch Academy program of Darien Public Schools, the school district is saving between \$150,000 and \$175,000, Superintendent of Schools Daniel Brenner told the Board of Education on Tuesday.

Brenner made the point during a presentation about Fitch Academy, which started this school year.

The program was created for those students at Darien High School who have emotional problems — often anxiety and depression — that cause them to avoid regular attendance at the high school.

Often these same students are either educated at home with tutors provided by the school district, or they go to other schools outside of town, where their special needs can be met.

The program, which takes place largely in one room and has a very low student-to-teacher ratio with a lot of individual attention, has been getting the students to come to classes more often. The program has also attracted students who were getting their education outside of town, which was expensive for the school district, Brenner said.

See also:

- [How Darien's New Fitch Academy, an Alternative High School, Is Doing](#) (Oct. 11)
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"There's no doubt about that 150 to 175 [thousand dollar] number, because that's hard and fast," Brenner said. One more student was expected to be selected for the program on Wednesday, and that could increase the cost savings.

Previously, school district officials had vague estimates of cost savings for the alternative high school program, but Brenner said that they now have a clearer picture of just how much is being saved, because they know how much would be spent on the out-of-district programs many of the Fitch Academy students left in order to join the Fitch program.

Also, about 100 hours of in-home tutoring had been expected to be used by the students who are now going to Fitch, and district officials now think that cost will be avoided.

The school district rents space from Darien Library for \$24,000 for one year — the only extra expense expected of the academy this year, Brenner has said. Staffing is provided by teachers and others already on the Darien Public Schools payroll.

Brenner, along with a teacher and a school psychologist, spoke during part of a presentation about how Fitch Academy, located in a room at Darien Library, is working out since the beginning of the year, when it held its first classes.

Future of Fitch Academy

Brenner said the program should be able to expand easily, with many students in it now expected to continue in it as demand for the program brings in other applicants.

In school districts where Brenner previously worked, one had about 28 students in a similar academy and another had about 70 (with nine classrooms and nine full-time staff members). For Fitch Academy next school year, Brenner said, "I think you can scale it to 24 [students]."

With that number, he would expect triple this year's savings (which would total \$450,000 to \$525,000 a year).

One problem for the next school year, however, will be finding space for the students, since Darien Library agreed to house the program for only one year.

"We're looking very hard to find space, and what the implications would be in terms of dollars and cents," Brenner said.

Brenner repeated a point he made before about the program: Other school districts may want to send students into it, and that would bring in revenue to the Darien school district.

He added, however, that one principle of similar programs has been that no student from an outside school district take up a spot that meant a Darien student who needed the program would not be able to get in. For the next school year, Darien students could continue to take all the seats.

Ultimately, it would be up to the Board of Education to decide how big the program should be, Brenner said.

"Superintendents are talking — I've had these conversations about shared services," he said, in large part because of concerns about whether state grants to districts will be shrinking. "I know superintendents will be interested in programs we have, as we will be interested in sending students to programs they have."

Search for a New Location

Although Brenner is already looking for a possible new location for the academy, he said, "my ability to navigate [the search for] space is limited," in part because he can't commit the school district to renting a place when the Board of Education hasn't decided whether or not to continue the program next year.

The space the school district is looking for would have to meet "very clear requirements" from state education regulations about providing handicapped bathrooms, a sprinkler system and handicapped access, he said.

Sometime this coming November, Brenner said, he would like to present the board with a proposal to continue the program, and at that point he'd be able to provide more information on how the program is working out.

Board member Tara Ochman said she and other board members probably need a long-term plan for the future of the academy, and Brenner replied that he could probably provide a three-year plan to the board for "next [school] year and the following two."

The big factors in any future budgeting for the program would be paying for space and staffing, Brenner said.

Ochman added at another point that if there's room for out-of-town students in the program, that would

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provide revenue to the district that she assumed the Board of Education would welcome.