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Education Budget Would Increase a Hair Under 3% in Proposal by Interim Superintendent Landon

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Tagged as : [Education Budget 2019-2020](#), [Elliott Landon](#)

Date : January 3, 2019

Darien's education budget would increase 2.98 percent starting in July in the proposal unveiled Thursday night by Interim Superintendent Elliott Landon to the Board of Education.

Spending would increase by \$2,924,920 to a total of \$101,047,186. The budget will now be reviewed by the Board of Education, the Board of Finance and the Representative Town Meeting. Only the Board of Education can adjust the costs of specific items in the budget.

"This budget has been developed with an unwavering commitment to provide students with exceptional programs and services while maximizing the economy of resources," Landon said in his budget message.

"The funding requested for the 2019-2020 school year reflects maintaining the current level of excellent instructional programs that Darien has come to expect, while including recommendations for enhancements

to existing programs and addressing areas within the educational system as needing continued improvement.

New Guidance Counselor, Four Psychologists

Landon also said in his written message at the beginning of the budget document:

"Among our efforts to enhance the work we do with our children, I have included in the proposed budget an increase of one guidance counselor at Middlesex Middle School, as well as four psychologists at the elementary levels.

"This request for additional psychologists will address the increase in the number of students with increasing mental health needs that can best be addressed at the elementary school level, early enough in a student's school experiences to eliminate or minimize more serious referral issues as these students grow older.

"With regard to the additional guidance counselor, this position will bring the ratio of counselors to students to a level more consistent with those in middle schools in our neighboring high-performing school districts and will provide for a more comprehensive counseling program; an increase in small group counseling; social/emotional skill building; and better support our students in their transition from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school.

Three Fewer Elementary School Teachers

"To partially offset these enhancements, there have been reductions in classroom teachers at the elementary level due to enrollment changes."

The teaching staff for the elementary grades is expected to be reduced by three teachers as a result of enrollment declines in the upcoming year.

In upcoming years, elementary school enrollment is expected to drop somewhat, then gradually and eventually rise, according to projections made by consultants for the school district. The projections are in the "Enrollment" section of the budget document.

The budget increase comes just under the 3 percent in total spending growth recommended by Board of Finance Chairman Jon Zagrodzky in his Finance Board "State of the Town" message on Dec. 10.