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On School Spending, PART 2: What Parent Groups Said About Special Ed at Feb 2 Hearing

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Date : February 3, 2016

Here are more statements from parents and parent-teacher organizations about Darien special education spending, from the Feb. 2 Board of Education public hearing.

These statements are from co-chairs of the Darien Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC) and from the Council of Darien School Parents special education subcommittee.

Darienite.com will publish the full text of every statement from the public hearing that we receive by email If

you didn't give your statement to the CDSP, please email it to us at dave@darienite.com; we encourage readers to send in letters to the editor on this or any other topic by emailing to the same address.

See also:

- [Superintendent Proposes 3.85% Increase in Darien Education Budget](#) (Jan. 8)
- [Support for Early Learning Program, Teacher Training at Board of Ed Budget Hearing](#) (main article, Feb. 2)
- [Mother of Autistic Child Explains How Early Learning Program Changed His Life \[VIDEO\]](#) (Feb. 2)
- [Freshman Soccer Team Captain to Board of Ed: Please, Can We Get Team Shorts That Won't Fall Down?](#) (Feb. 2)
- [On School Spending, PART 1: Statements at Feb 2 Budget Hearing](#) (Feb. 3)
- [On School Spending, PART 3: Statements from Budget Hearing](#) (Feb. 3)
- [On School Spending, PART 4: Statements from Budget Hearing](#) (Feb. 3)
- [On School Spending, PART 5: Statements on the Early Learning Program from Budget Hearing](#) (Feb. 3)

Courtney Darby and Tricia Bresnahan, co-chairs of SEPAC

[[Here's a link](#) to the *Darien Special Education Parent Advisory Committee* website.]

Communication

We would like to thank Dr. Brenner, Shirley Klein, the administration and building principals for their work to improve communication with all parents.

We have heard many positive stories from parents regarding communication so far this year. We especially appreciate their time during public meetings to answer parent questions and inform parents on special and general education initiatives. In addition, we want to thank the many teachers who work tirelessly to support our children's learning.

In today's talk, we will be highlighting a few key areas based on parent feedback, and areas that are protected by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

For those who aren't familiar with IDEA, a few key points are:

— Special education means specially designed instruction

— To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are nondisabled;

— Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

Professional Development

We are pleased to see the district’s proposed investment in our teachers through professional development.

We understand plans are underway to provide Teachers College training in writing for all of our students. As special education is about “specifically designed instruction” we encourage the district to provide specialized training in areas such as math and writing.

To address the diverse needs of students — whether their disability is ADHD, autism or any disability — all too often there is a gap between where a child is performing and where the class is — teachers need more training on how to close the gap.

Reading

We support the district’s reading initiatives and the initial roll out of Orton Gillingham training for special education and general education teachers. It would be helpful if parents were provided a timetable outlining when all elementary and middle school special education teachers will be trained.

In addition, we encourage the district to train all K to 3 teachers to ensure the implementation of this methodology in the classroom and across settings.

If you put yourself in the shoes of a parent with a 2nd grader who has a reading disability, you would want to understand how your child will be supported in the third grade and beyond. A comprehensive and effective reading program in district will help retain students and could eventually help reduce outplacement costs.

At the Middle School, parents need to better understand the system of supports through SRBI, as well as how teachers are being supported and specially trained in areas such as math and writing.

We understand an open reading specialist position exists at the middle school. Based on parent feedback on middle school student needs, we urge you to fill this position as soon as possible, and make training in OG for existing teachers a priority.

Technology/ 1 to 1

We value Dr. Brenner's experience in educational technology and his leadership in creating a 1 to 1 initiative for late elementary and middle school, as well as the pilot proposal at the high school. We support this initiative and feel technology is an essential and important investment for all students.

As others have noted, the effectiveness of the proposal will be determined by a well-trained staff to implement it.

In addition, for students who require assistive technology, a thoughtful collaboration between the technology department and special education will be of utmost importance.

It has been shown that retrofitting is expensive (in dollars and to a student's growth) — and we need to plan now so that students who rely on technology have the same access as all students.

Along with training, we urge the district to develop a clear plan for assistive technology that they can share with all stakeholders. The current situation with pockets of expertise in assistive technology make it difficult for it to be shared across hundreds of students in the district.

DHS Academic Support Restructuring

We appreciate the district's efforts and work to restructure academic support at the high school and ensure students are being educated in the least restrictive environment.

This is an important issue for students in special education and those who may struggle in a particular subject so we encourage the district to get input from students and families. In order for these models to work we believe the following is needed:

- 1) Professional development for teachers who have never co-taught or team taught -- to collaborate and to provide effective differentiation and specialized instruction as needed.
- 2) Both team and co-taught teachers need common planning time.
- 3) We have heard from families that high school teachers do not consistently provide accommodations and modifications. We strongly believe that professional development on curriculum modification needs to be provided for all special education and content area teachers.

While the IEP check-off guidelines is a positive first step for ensuring teachers are aware of accommodations and modifications, many students are still not receiving them. More oversight of this process is also needed.

- 4) As the restructuring of academic support at DHS is an ambitious enterprise, we hope the district will consider having an onsite special education administrator. This is an important role to provide guidance to the staff on best practices as well as careful oversight to make sure that the restructuring is effective.

Co-Taught Classes

In addition to training at DHS, professionals who co-teach classes at the elementary and middle school need training. They need time and support. As Dr. Brenner has noted, two teachers in a classroom is an expensive proposition. One teacher cannot be providing the job of a teacher aide.

Professional development should help both teachers bring their respective professional expertise to the table for the benefit of all students. The administration has said they plan to evaluate the current co-taught classes in the elementary schools to determine their effectiveness.

We believe that if the teachers are given enough guidance and support, the classes will be successful and will further inclusive education.

ELP

When it comes to the Early Learning Program, “protect your investment” is a good motto. A successful integrated pre-school, the program ensures that children with disabilities and without have a positive first experience with school and enter elementary school prepared.

The long waiting list for typical students year after year is a testimony to the effectiveness of the program. And it makes money. ELP deserves attention, a long-term plan, a look at possible consolidation and an investment in professional development to ensure it continues its success.

Transitions

Finally, as our district has been through many changes in recent years, we hope the administration will pay careful attention to the transition between schools—ELP to kindergarten, elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and high school to college or vocation.

Our children want to be independent, and we need our teachers to carefully support and foster independence so this ultimate goal can be achieved.

Valerie Horne for CDSP Special Education Subcommittee

My name is Valerie Horne, 9 Concord Lane. I am here tonight to address special education on behalf of CDSP’s special education subcommittee—not only the initiatives funded by this budget, but also the vision and trajectory of special education that has been put forth by our new administration.

As we gather here, it is simple enough to look back at the last few years and recognize that our district has been largely focusing on the issue of compliance.

We must acknowledge and address the unsustainable growth in spending on outplacement that is the result—at

least in part—of past non-compliance and lack of meaningful programming for some children with special needs. And we must ask ourselves how to move forward in a way that is best for our district and all learners.

I would argue that the path forward has two key components: building a culture of compliance and creating programming so that more students' needs may be met within our school system.

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The establishment of standardized operating procedures for students in special education is a foundation on which the design and delivery of an appropriate education is built.

A failure to consistently implement those procedures and policies as part of a broader culture of compliance can lead to a failure to create meaningful and effective programming for children, uneven delivery of that programming, and wasteful spending.

Through his chain of command, Dr. [Dan] Brenner has articulated that teachers, case managers, psychologists, and building administrators must take ownership of, and have accountability for, students in special education.

The next step for our district to create a culture of compliance is appropriate professional development in areas of compliance, reading, math, technology, social skills and differentiation of instruction.

Professional development also is required in the area of IEP development, so that appropriate personnel know how to write valid and measurable goals for children with special needs. Each of these areas is supported in the proposed budget. It is worth noting that training in most of these areas supports the district's entire range of learners.

An equally critical step to building a strong and fiscally responsible school system is building programming in-house to serve the needs of our student population, thereby avoiding unsustainable growth in outplacements.

The school district has a legal and ethical obligation to offer children with special needs a free and appropriate education. The district may offer that education in-house, or it may outsource that education to another school at the district's expense.

As a result of past compliance problems, out-of-district placement has grown significantly in recent years, and associated out-of-district costs have risen in conjunction.

Reversing this trend so that the district retains more children with special needs, and possibly even retrieves some children who already have been outplaced, will require development of appropriate and specialized programming.

In this regard, Dr. Brenner is employing his “work smarter, not harder” mentality by repurposing funds for two SESS facilitators who resigned from the district and restructuring the special education department to include another director for elementary students.

The goal of this change is to allow the Assistant Superintendent of Special Education and Student Services, Shirley Klein, to focus on assessing the needs of the student population and to build programming and capacity within the district.

Developing appropriate programming is crucial to the district’s ability to satisfy its legal and ethical obligation to educate children with special needs, and eventually should result in significant economic efficiencies and cost savings.

Although we support Dr. Brenner’s goal of creating efficiencies and focusing administrative time on building capacity, it remains critical that an appropriate structure be in place in the secondary setting to ensure fidelity in programming and case management.

Finally, I would like to share with you a story about a young girl who attends an elementary school in town. This young girl likes books and Barbies. This young girl also has a disability that is, in part, physical. She wanted more than anything to be able to cross the monkey bars like her peers.

At first, she stood on the playground and watched. Eventually, she had to courage to try--first holding onto a bar and dropping down. Each day — with the support of staff and cheered on by her friends — she tackled those bars. Over a period of many, many, months she made progress — slowed at times by the appearance of blisters — but not discouraged. Eventually those blisters became calluses.

And, finally, one day she made it all the way to the end. That victory was not hers alone; it was shared and celebrated by all those who had cheered, witnessed, and helped her work toward her accomplishment. This is a story about struggle, persistence, and — eventually — success. It is a microcosm of what our community can accomplish when we support and embrace a challenge.

This evening we stand in support of the district’s proposed 2016-17 budget and the vision of the new administration. In doing so, we want to express that it is a first step; the district is hanging onto the first rung and swinging forward.

There will be blisters, but those will form into strong calluses. We believe that with persistence and with the support of the community, we can succeed in building a solid, financially sound school system that meets learners at varied levels and supports meaningful education outcomes for all.

[Board of Education - Budget Public Hearing 2-2-16](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).