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On School Spending, PART 5: Statements on the Early Learning Program from Budget Hearing

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Here are statements advocating support of the Early Learning Program, all from the Board of Education's Feb. 2 public hearing on the school budget.

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 2: What Parent Groups Said About Special Ed at Feb 2 Hearing](#) (Feb. 3)
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Cassie Yusi on the Early Learning Program

Good evening, members of the board.

My name is Cassie Yusi. [She said she has two children in the program or expected to join it.]

Darien is so fortunate to have a program like ELP, as many similar communities do not. As someone who spent much time researching where to lay down roots, I truly feel that ELP sets the Darien schools apart in many ways. Most specifically because it speaks to the fact that the community and board value early childhood education and early intervention and are invested in the development of their youngest students.

I have spent the last 12 years as a special education and AIS teacher in Rye, N.Y. and I see daily the benefit and impact of early childhood education and early intervention with my own students.

Solid, meaningful, well-executed experiences with both things are crucial, and the investment in these things pays dividends when those children reach kindergarten and begin their journey through the Darien schools.

Thanks to the hard work of the truly amazing teachers, aides and administrators of ELP, Darien is so very fortunate to have a huge leg up on neighboring districts in this area.

ELP is a treasure of the Darien schools and should be nurtured and treated as such because investing in the program is an investment in the elementary schools, the middle school and the high school. The success of those higher education experiences begins with high quality early childhood education and early intervention for those who need it.

[...]

My hope is that you continue to demonstrate your understanding of how important ELP is by providing the funds for the teachers to have access to high quality professional development, by continuing to foster a

connection between ELP and the kindergarten curriculum, by valuing the ELP curriculum and investing the time and effort into its development, and by recognizing the importance of providing our youngest learners with the support and tools they need to begin their academic journey. Thank you for your time.

Mary Jo Miller on the ELP

Mary Jo Miller (52 Relihan Road)

I came to tonight's meeting to express my support of Darien's Early Learning Program. I know there has been a lot of discussion about the cost of out-placement expenses and the district's desire to reduce this by providing more rich and diverse programs that drive parents to keep their children in district.

My son is a graduate of ELP and currently attending kindergarten in district. However, you should be aware that he is an extremely complex case, nonverbal, with low-functioning autism. He is a prime candidate for outplacement based on his complex needs.

However, because of ELP and the intense amount of work that went into his kindergarten programming, he has been able to stay in district with a wonderful support system and program individualized to meet his needs. So far he is an in-district success story.

But this success did not come easily. ELP was a fantastic experience, but he was very challenging and required a lot of our-of-the-box thinking by his teachers, therapists and administrators.

In many ways, they were not prepared to offer him the interventions he required and it was with tremendous effort on everyone's part to develop the programming he needed.

ELP is a gem of a program, but the special needs children admitted at age 3 often have many challenges that an educator, even with a master's degree, may not be prepared to teach. I can say this because I hold a master's in early education myself, and I know that the complexity and diversity of disabilities our ELP teachers are faced with are far beyond what they are sometimes prepared for.

Recognizing that these teachers are encountering a multitude of disabilities at the most critical development time in a child's life, we need to continue to support them. Professional development will help prepare them to successfully educate the youngest and most vulnerable students with proper intervention and programming so that, hopefully, these children will require less support as they move forward.

And more importantly, those with the greatest needs can stay in-district because our teachers are prepared to educate them. They so desperately want to do this. Please give them the means to be successful.

Additionally, I ask that you consider two important steps for ELP. The first being the establishment of a curriculum that is consistent with kindergarten preparation.

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The standards for kindergarten have increased significantly, and considering that ELP not only has special needs students to support, but typical students to prepare for kindergarten as well, an investment into the ELP curriculum should be supported. It's important that we not lose sight of the fact that ELP is not just a special needs program but a mainstream one as well, that it is preparing ALL of our children.

Lastly, I greatly hope that the district and board continues to explore an addition of a pre-K program for the 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds who are simply not ready for kindergarten regardless of their preparation.

The standards have become that much more demanding, many children are not emotionally, mentally or intellectually ready to handle those rigors, even with the proper preparation, and they should have a public pre-K option so they can begin their educational experience when appropriate, rather than having to attend a private pre-K or get lost in a kindergarten class.

Thank you for your time, and I hope I have provided some insight into a wonderful program in Darien that I hope you will support.