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On School Spending, PART 1: Statements at Feb 2 Budget Hearing

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You can get some insight into the priorities and concerns of Darien parents and parent-teacher organizations from these statements made at the Feb. 2 public hearing on the superintendent's proposed budget.

Here are statements from Cathy Butcher, budget chair for the Council of Darien School Parents (CDSP); Jill McCammon and Shelly Skoglund, co-chairs of the CDSP; and Peter Orphanos, speaking for the Darien High School Parents Association.

Darienite.com will publish 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; statements may not necessarily be published on the home page).

See also:

- [Support for Early Learning Program, Teacher Training at Board of Ed Budget Hearing](#) (main article, Feb. 2)
- [Superintendent Proposes 3.85% Increase in Darien Education Budget](#) (Jan. 8)
- [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 2: What Parent Groups Said About Special Ed at Feb 2 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)

Here are three of the statements from the CDSP. We'll publish more, soon (these are statements as prepared, some minor wording changes likely were made in delivery — we'll publish the TV79 video of the event when it becomes available):

Cathy Butcher, Budget Chair for the Council of Darien School Parents:

Members of the Board of Education, Darien Public School Administration and general public, thank you for your time tonight. My name is Cathy Butcher, and I'm the Budget Chair for the Council of Darien School Parents, or CDSP.

CDSP is the umbrella organization for the parent-teacher organizations at all seven public schools in town, and our mission is to promote understanding and communication among parents, schools, the administration and the Board of Education.

Because informed communication is a key component of our mission, PTO co-chairs and budget representatives from each of the Darien Public Schools are voting members of CDSP, and all parents and guardians of public school students are non-voting members.

Given how connected our members are to their various school communities, CDSP is in a unique position to gather feedback from a large number of parents throughout the year about a full range of issues affecting our schools, and during the budget season, we solicit targeted feedback about parents' priorities and concerns.

Consistent with our purpose of communicating the varied voices of school parents, tonight you will hear from the CDSP co-chairs, then from several members of CDSP, who will speak about the following subjects:

- Technology;

- Capital expenditures;
- High school;
- Special education;
- Early Learning Program; World Language; and Curriculum.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jill McCammon and Shelly Skoglund, Co-Chairs of the CDSP:

My name is Jill McCammon of 81 Old Kings Hwy South. I am a co-chair of the Council of Darien School Parents. My name is Shelly Skoglund. I live at 139 Leroy Ave and I serve with Jill as co-chair of the CDSP.

We'd like to begin tonight by acknowledging the very positive shifts we have seen in the district this year, particularly in the hiring of Dr. Brenner and his very experienced cabinet. Parents are excited and optimistic about what this team of seasoned, proven professionals can bring to our district and grateful for the enthusiasm and joy with which they do it.

We are encouraged by what we have seen so far and anticipate great things as this leadership team transitions from recovery to transformation into a district that prepares children for the challenges of the 21st century.

We are asking our community to support our school's leadership by supporting this budget. In our opinion, a budget should not be a one year snapshot, but a multi-year view into the future. And we think that future holds great promise for our district. Let's give Dr. Brenner and his team the time and resources to show us what their leadership can bring to our students.

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With regards to this year's budget we believe the underlying theme is redefinition: of how work is done, how budgets are created and how budget transparency can transform management accountability. Of the total proposed increase, \$1.5 MM or about 70 percent, is contractual salary adjustments.

With minimal additional funding, Dr. Brenner has been able to add significant and meaningful program change by redefining how we work. Dr. Brenner has been clear since his first day here that "because we always did it this way" is never an acceptable answer.

For example, he has asked our elementary schools to redefine the work done by aides and identify efficiencies in order to do more with less. Another example is the 1:1 tech initiative, which provides a robust

addition to our curriculum delivery, and also allows us to repurpose computer labs as classrooms without significant construction costs.

We are also thrilled to see the increasing focus on budget transparency and the recoding this year will provide us excellent visibility and increased management accountability at the school level in years to come.

As a parent body, we value excellence, but for years have been settling for mediocrity, band aid solutions and following where others districts have led. We have seen the unsustainable growth in Out of District placements because we failed to build our own capacity to serve those children.

We continue to make reconfigurations of recently built schools because we built for value vs. building for the future. We strongly believe that while we may have saved money in the short term, the long term costs of fixing these mistakes will be steep.

As I stand up here reading remarks from a piece of paper, I realize how different this same experience will be 20 years from now when our children are in our shoes. The skills our children will need to thrive are changing rapidly. We will expect children to be able to use technology fluidly; to communicate in a way that engages their audience with more than just words.

Our children need to be able to speak multiple languages, including computer coding, systems navigation, mathematics and the languages of our global world. Children will need to be flexible, adaptable and resilient. Our district needs to support them on this evolution.

21st century learning assumes that neither development nor learning are linear. It inspires students with rich content and experiences to cultivate their natural enthusiasm for learning.

We need flexibility throughout our school system in both content and setting so that all students can rise to the challenge. The proposal for the 200/300 models at the high school is an example of flexibility in setting. We look forward to more details about how this will roll out and to evaluation of how well it works for our different learners.

Our teachers and administrators are the foundation upon which success is built and they too must have the professional development to build their own adaptability and flexibility. This is a paradigm shift for our school system and it will require ongoing investment in the development of our human capital, Pre-K through high school.

Our thinking and planning for school facilities must outpace our current needs We must incorporate flexibility and adaptability to allow for fluctuations in enrollment and evolving uses of physical spaces. We know SOME of what we need right now. We need a new gym floor at Ox Ridge.

We need enough classrooms to teach our children with the right teacher:student ratio. Some things we can readily imagine - libraries as maker spaces for creativity and collaboration. We must plan better than we ever

have. We WILL be required to make capital investments in our schools over the next few years, and we expect those investments to sustain educational integrity, proper fiscal management and future flexibility.

Dr. Brenner has developed this budget with diligence. We urge all town boards to use that same diligence as they review for approval. We have heard talk of across the board cuts of \$1M to \$2M from factions within the RTM.

In terms of any across-the-board reductions in this budget we urge our town representatives to represent their constituents. A majority of taxpayers in Darien are the parents of school children and they value investing their tax dollars in high performing public schools. Indiscriminate cuts will have a detrimental impact all of on our children.

We have also heard a request for an increase to the Educational Cost Sharing estimate in next year? budget. Over the past decade, the state of Connecticut has reduced reimbursement for Excess Costs from 100 percent to the low 70s. Given that the state is now facing unprecedented fiscal pressure, it is reasonable to expect a lower reimbursement rate.

Members of the Board of Education, thank you for your continued hard work on behalf of the families of this town. The Council of Darien School Parents stands here tonight in support of this budget because of what it represents: a long-term vision crafted by a cabinet of educational leaders. We urge you to make that vision a reality for every single one of our students.

Peter Orphanos for Darien High School Parents Association (DHSPA)

Good evening, members of the Board of Education, Dr. Brenner, the Darien Public

School Administration and general public, thank you for your time tonight. My name is Peter Orphanos, 67 Raymond St., and I have a ninth grade daughter at Darien High School. I speak to you tonight on behalf of Darien High School Parents Association in support of the Superintendent's proposed 2016-2017 budget, specifically as it pertains to DHS.

Darien's commitment to excellence in public education is why many of us chose to live here. We must, however, continue moving forward and strengthening the quality of education at Darien High School and throughout the whole district.

We wish to acknowledge and support the work of Principal Dunn and her team at DHS in enhancing and enriching the learning experience and expanding our course offering in response to student interest and achievement, while maintaining current staffing levels.

The small group guidance seminars are offering students at every grade level the opportunity to build skills and prepare for college applications and admissions. The new communication structure for Special Education

families is creating stronger connections between school and home.

Homeroom has been replaced by the Link Advisory program, which is fostering a greater sense of community among our students. The proposed 2016-2017 DHS budget includes no FTE [full-time equivalents, essentially new staff positions] requests even though three new courses will be added and the school plans to adopt three new classroom structures for 300 level classes in the fall of 2016.

I would like to focus on five important areas of the proposed DHS budget: The first three areas represent capital expenses: 1) Darien High School cafeteria expansion; 2) replacement of the stadium turf field; and 3) athletic equipment storage. The fourth and fifth areas concern operating expenses: 4) athletic funding; and 5) enhanced student supports.

Capital expenditures:

1. Darien High School cafeteria expansion:

Rising enrollment has placed increasing space constraints on Darien High School. Locker pods are now classrooms, the auxiliary cafeteria is now a classroom and every available space is used to its fullest.

It should come as no surprise that DHS has a significant overcrowding problem in the cafeteria, and this problem cannot be solved without expansion. It is common for students to squeeze two or three to a seat; others eat in the hallways, in the “Chill Zone,” on the sky bridge next to the auditorium, in coaches offices, or outside when feasible.

Lower-cost alternatives have been explored and implemented to address this issue, including adding cafe tables and chairs to the vending machine area, and converting from three lunch shifts to four, yet the problem persists.

Expansion is the only solution. Enrollment is projected to rise and the current situation will only get worse without attention. October 1, 2015 enrollment was 1,358 and is projected to rise to 1,400 by 2018, putting the school at maximum capacity.

Only with approval of this project as a part of this budget can we reasonably expect to have the project completed prior to the anticipated 2018 enrollment. The proposed expansion offers our town solid value. This expansion will allow for 100-125 additional seats for each of the four lunch shifts, or approximately 400 seats per day.

A cafeteria where more of our students can gather with their peers helps to create an important sense of community. This project is also eligible for a 20% reimbursement from the State.

2. Stadium turf field:

The predicted life of a turf field is between 8-10 years, and the stadium turf field, which was installed in

2004-05, has exceeded that number. There is a trend away from grass fields because turf fields offer better long-term value for the town: they allow for play in and immediately following inclement weather, especially in the spring, and turf fields hold up to intense use from high school and youth programs. Given Darien's overall shortage of field space, turf fields' additional utility is invaluable, and the stadium field is an important part of the field inventory.

3. Athletic equipment storage:

Storage space for valuable athletic equipment is deficient. Current "facilities" consist of five commercial containers and there is inadequate storage space for expensive athletic equipment, including the brand new netting system (nets and poles) which surround the oval turf fields and keep balls from hitting cars and spectators. With equipment located all over the campus, inventory control is a problem. The only responsible course is to properly store and care for the equipment that the town has already invested in, in one central location with better control and management of items.

Operating expenditures:

4. Athletic funding:

We know that the Board is awaiting a full by-sport report on athletic funding, to better understand funding inconsistencies and gaps. While establishing a philosophy to govern this funding is a laudable long-term goal, we cannot shortchange existing structure by failing to fund or reducing the budget for our athletics program in the short-term. We ask that the board fully support the current funding requests while pursuing a long-term solution to this issue.

5. Enhanced student supports:

We are encouraged by Principal Dunn's 200/300 level classes initiative, including the lab, co-taught and team-taught models. We applaud the administration for bringing forward a creative and innovative approach which they believe can be achieved within in the current FTE budget.

The addition of these three instructional options has the potential to provide greater inclusion, opportunity and challenge for students currently in 200 level classes for whom success at the 300 level would be possible with the right supports.

We look forward to hearing details about implementation, including the professional development and planning time that teachers will receive, the plans for communicating with parents so that they are prepared to make the most appropriate class selection for their child, and the follow-through that will be in place to ensure that regardless of which option a student and their family may choose, the accommodations provided for under the student's IEP or 504 plan are maintained.

Others will speak/have spoken tonight to the district technology plan and professional development, but they merit additional, brief recognition. Specifically, the 1-2-1 computing program is of great importance to

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Darien High School -- which will be fully Google classroom enabled this fall.

We commend the administration for its thoughtful and deliberate approach to selecting the most appropriate hardware for our students. Moreover, we fully support the professional development that will accompany the technology transformation, as it is critical to the success of this forward-thinking and long overdue initiative.

In sum, we believe that the targeted investments in the Proposed Budget will allow Darien High School to maintain excellence. We caution against illusions of short-term savings that ultimately compromise long-term goals and objectives.

Thank you.

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