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State of the Town: Board of Ed Chairman: Covid's Been Expensive, But District's in Good Shape

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Darien Board of Education Chairman David Dineen delivered his first State of the Town report to the Representative Town Meeting on Monday.

"As of Friday, Dec. 4, the District had 16 active COVID-19 cases with a cumulative total of 881 persons quarantined," Dineen said. "As school, town, country and state cases continue to rise, decisions on the school learning model will be reviewed on a regular basis," in consultation with or with attention to town, state and federal officials and agencies, he said.

"Presently, total COVID spending is \$3,294,477, less grant and transfers of \$2,477,939," Dineen said.

The district's enrollment consultants predict the student population will have "stable growth over the next decade, with a reduction of 76 students by that time," Dineen said. "The District remains a highly desirable school system known for its academic excellence.

"Our current average cost per pupil for FY 20 is \$21,444, which is slightly less than the last two years which is still in the median range in our comparable district reference group," he said.

Here's the speech as prepared:

Good Evening Mr. Moderator, members of the RTM, fellow elected officials and members of the community, both here and those of you watching on Channel 79. On behalf of my colleagues from the Board of Education, it is my pleasure to update you on our work for the children, families and taxpayers of Darien.

It is a privilege to stand before you this evening as the newly appointed Chair of the Board of Education. I would like to publicly take this opportunity to pay tribute to the leadership, tireless efforts and accomplishments of Mrs. Tara Ochman in her role as Board Chair during the past three years.

NEW SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

Last year, we celebrated Dr. Addley's appointment as Darien's new Superintendent of Schools. His appointment was certainly timely in preparing to face the challenges presented by this most unusual year. Alan's character, experience, passion and care have helped successfully guide the District through these uncharted times. We look forward to many more years of Alan's leadership in Darien.

COVID-19

This past year has been an unprecedented school year with unprecedented and unanticipated challenges as we all deal with the COVID-19 health pandemic. Navigating this health crisis continues to be a collaborative effort between students, staff, parents and town government agencies. We are particularly proud that we have been able to keep our children in school throughout the pandemic. We express our appreciation to the administration and teachers for all their amazing efforts to make this happen for Darien's children ... from the complete overnight transformation of the school district to an online school district back in March, to the development of a comprehensive Reopening Plan back in July, and to the care and support provided to our children every day since. Parents, staff and students have risen to the pandemic's challenge through practicing recommended health, safety mitigation practices and following isolation and quarantine practices.

We extend our special words of appreciation to Alicia Casucci (Director of Nursing & COVID-19 Compliant Liaison), Mr. David Knauf (the town's Health Director) and Dr. Timothy Kenefick. These individuals have worked tirelessly on behalf of the school system and Darien community.

Their efforts, dedication and guidance have been instrumental in maintaining the health and safety of students, staff, the Darien community and in helping to keep our schools open.

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As of Friday, Dec. 4, the District had 16 active COVID-19 cases with a cumulative total of 881 persons quarantined. As school, town, country and state cases continue to rise, decisions on the school learning model will be reviewed on a regular basis, in consultation with our medical advisors, the latest information from CDC, the Connecticut Department of Public Health and always with the health of students and staff as the priority.

Keeping our schools open has required expenditures for mitigation strategies and improvements to health and safety practices. Expenditures have included but are not limited to PPEs, Plexiglas, additional staffing for social distancing and supervision, nursing and additional technology resources. Presently, total COVID spending is \$3,294,477...less grant and transfers of \$2,477,939.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Last year, under the guidance of the Superintendent of Schools and Dr. Richard Lemons, the Board engaged in a process of strategic planning to identify the next level of work for the District. The work this past year has been overseen by a Strategic Planning Committee consisting of 27 members representing students, staff, parents, community members and members of the Board of Education. We thank all those involved for devoting their time and talents to this important project. Recommendations from this committee are now ready to be received and reviewed by the Board. We look forward to being able to adopt this plan early in the new year and for it to guide the Board's and District's work over the next five years and beyond.

ENROLLMENT

Currently 4,680 children are enrolled K-12 in the Darien Schools, with another 100 children in our ELP program. Our most recent enrollment study, by the independent firm Milone & MacBroom, projected out to 2021-2031 noting a stable growth over the next decade with a reduction of 76 students by that time. The District remains a highly desirable school system known for its academic excellence.

Our current average cost per pupil for FY 20 is \$21,444, which is slightly less than the last two years which is still in the median range in our comparable district reference group.

BUDGET INITIATIVES 2020-2021

When we last met, the RTM approved the 2020-2021 budget. Some of the work directly supported by your votes and ongoing support included but not limited to:

? Maintaining reasonable class sizes

? Providing 1-1 access to technology for students to access learning from home

? Upgrading security with additional cameras installed and the installation of additional emergency buttons pending

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? Focusing on Social Emotional Learning, including benchmark assessments and inclusion on report cards. The addition of the second school psychologist at each elementary school has been particularly important in this new environment.

? Improving network and wireless infrastructure for student learning

? Expanding Math in Focus to grades K-5 & continued implementation of NGSS

? Providing instructional materials for mathematics in grades 6-8

? Continued implementation of Responsive Classroom Model & DBT

? Supporting fully remote learners as they transition between learning models

? With the assistance of our wonderful PTOs, creating new celebrations for the 5th and 8th grade moving up ceremonies and a high school drive through graduation

? Designing new ways to access learning through Remote & Hybrid learning and virtual staff meetings, team meetings, parent conferences, virtual musical performances, field trips and fall play.

? Supporting STEM initiative via Project Lead the Way

? Providing professional learning for staff focused on Health & Safety Protocols, Technology Integration, new software platforms, wellness, and new learning models,

? Adding assistant coaching positions to support increased student participation

STUDENT RECOGNITION & RETURN ON INVESTMENT

? The taxpayers in Darien receive a tremendous return on investment when comparing student academic achievement and per pupil expenditures, as compared with all other Connecticut districts.

? Students' performance across standardized testing continues to be exceptional

? We had 5 National Merit Semi finalists and 21 Commended Scholars

? The continued recognition of the District for its academic excellence as reported by U. S. News & World Report which named Darien High School the #1 Public High School in CT (2019), and Newsweek named DHS one of the 100 Best STEM High Schools in the Nation (2019)

? The production of virtual music performances (chorus, band, orchestra, theater)

? The Middlesex Quizbowl team continued to experience accolades in Championships

? The continued success of our athletes and sports teams, FCIAC and CIAC

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE NEXT LEVEL OF WORK

In the new year we will work with both the Education Committee and the Finance & Budget Committee to communicate the details of the Administrator's Contract that respects the hard and talented work of our administrative team while recognizing the current economic climate. Leadership matters and the work of our administrative team was most noticeable and necessary this year. It is critical that we continue to attract and retain talented school administrators. The value of our human capital cannot be underestimated. We look forward to continuing this conversation with the RTM.

This year, the Board has commenced initial planning for the removal of portables across the district with consideration also being given to the educational needs of the elementary libraries. These facilities are not reflective of today's educational and safety needs.

ACCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Students are always our top priority and we make decisions in the best interests of all children and their educational needs.

At Friday's remote Legislative breakfast, Dr. Addley and I, along with many Fairfield County Districts implored our state representatives to advocate for appropriate funding for education and removing the cap on the excess cost grant for special education services. Additional topics discussed included the support for the expansion of The Open Choice Program in the region, support for minority recruitment, relief from state mandates (eg. 180 days/900 hours), support for mental health and social emotional needs, and additional funding for COVID related needs.

OX RIDGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

This month sees the commence of the work on the new Ox Ridge Elementary School and the culmination of Board of Education and town priority. This exciting project has been planned and expertly managed by an amazing building committee overseen by Kip Koons. This \$63 M project, scheduled to fully open in the spring of 2023, will provide generations of Darien children with a state of the art educational environment. We thank the Board of Selectmen, and the RTM for their support of the new Ox Ridge Elementary School.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Budget season is upon us and the Board looks forward to collaborating with all town officials and bodies in bringing forward a creative and financially responsive budget to the community.

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Innovative programming and budgeting allows the District to protect the investment the community has already made to education and allows for some necessary improvements. Our exemplary school system directly benefits our taxpayers by maintaining property values and making Darien a very desirable town for families and a desirable place for teachers to work. Darien's commitment to providing an educational experience characterized by excellence is reflected in the community's support for town budgets. It is critical during these uncertain times that the town continues to protect its educational programs and investments.

On behalf of the entire Board of Education, I thank you for this opportunity to address the town. I wish you a healthy, safe and happy holiday season, and look forward to future discussions in the New Year.