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Superintendent Proposes 3.85% Increase in Darien Education Budget

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Categories : [Education](#), [Government & Politics](#)

Tagged as : [Budget 2016-2017](#), [Education Budget 2016-2017](#), [FY 2017](#), [FY 2017 Budget](#)

Date : January 8, 2016

Darien Public Schools spending would go up 3.85 percent, to \$94.2 million in the 2016-2017 fiscal year under the budget proposal Superintendent Dan Brenner put forward to the Board of Education this week.

Spending would rise \$3,492,817 in Brenner's plan.

Asked what parts of the new initiatives he's proposing are particularly important, Brenner said: "Two areas that we focused on were both professional development [that is, ongoing teacher training] as well as on the technology, both of which we think will make significant differences in kids' lives inside the classroom."

Brenner pointed out that 64 percent of the budget goes to pay employee salaries, another 13 percent goes for benefits (for a total of 77 percent), both of which are largely already determined by pre-existing union

contracts and other contracts.

Add to that the 6 percent of the budget that pays for utilities and transportation (which are difficult to change and even more difficult in the short term), and the vast majority of a school district budget — in this case, 83 percent — is largely set, unless officials want to cut services.

The district has the equivalent of almost 758 full-time employees (when the hours of part-time employees are included), a number which would go down by a bit more than three employees in the next fiscal year, according to the budget proposal.

You can download [the full budget proposal in PDF form here](#), with explanations of some spending items and a breakdown of costs, including what individual schools are spending, and capital budget requests. See below for a video of the budget presentation, which begins with a couple of minutes of blank screen (just wait for the meeting to start) and runs about 39 minutes. You can skip ahead when it gets boring.

Districtwide, contractual salaries (under union contracts and other, individual contracts) "are one of the largest cost drivers" increasing the budget, Brenner said. Salaries districtwide would go up 2.52 percent, or \$1.5 million in the proposed budget. (Union contracts for maintenance, groundkeepers and cafeteria employees all expire June 30 of this year, and the teacher's union contract expires June 30, 2017.)

Per-pupil spending

Per pupil spending in the proposed budget would be \$18,548, Brenner said. Since 2007, he pointed out, Darien's school spending has been lower than the other districts in the District Reference Group A (or "DRG A") — a set of nine school districts (in similar communities) that the state Education Department uses for statistical comparisons of performance and spending.

New initiatives in technology spending include establishing "copy centers" in the schools, wider use of smartboards and the "1:1 initiative" (see below) in elementary schools and Middlesex Middle School. Money would also be spent on "upgrades to our hardware districtwide: routers, access points & switches," according to a slide in Brenner's budget presentation.

The budget proposal calls for more than doubling spending on the purchases of new computer equipment — raising that budget item from \$200,000 in this year's budget to a proposed \$487,829. The budget document says this about new computer equipment for students:

"For 2016-17 funding is designated for student devices — Chromebooks — at the elementary and middle school level. The budget for computers would be used to support a 1:1 computing environment for all students in Grades 5 to 7.

"Students in these grades would be assigned a Chromebook to be used in school and at home. These devices would be actively managed by the Darien Public Schools. Students in Grade 4 also would have individually-assigned Chromebooks, but they would be kept in the classroom.

"In Grades 2 and 3, a charging cart with 25 Chromebooks would be shared by two classrooms. Additionally, a charging cart with Chromebooks would be assigned to Kindergarten to be shared."

The technology budget also calls for \$604,344 in spending on software maintenance, including buying new software and enhancements to current software. A total of \$223,768 is requested for copiers. The district is planning to have "copy centers" in schools, which are expected to save money.

Another \$150,000 is proposed for hiring contracted workers to help implement the 1:1 initiative and for "wireless infrastructure" to support the same program.

Capital projects

Much of Brenner's presentation reviewed capital projects proposed for the upcoming fiscal year in each of the schools and at the district headquarters at 35 Leroy Ave. The projects are mostly rated as high priorities in the five-year capital projects plan recently released by the district. Brenner proposed spending \$2,116,000 on the "Priority 1" projects in the 2017 fiscal year.

Enrollment

Estimated districtwide enrollment, which can drive up costs, is expected to rise by only 10 students, to 4,857 by Oct. 1 of this year, although an increase of 19 students is expected for Darien High School (to 1,377) by that date. By Oct. 1, 2018, the high school's enrollment is expected to be 1,433 (an increase of 75 students over last year) and then remain roughly flat for the next two years.

Middlesex Middle School enrollment, now at 1,167, is expected to decrease by about 20 students in the next school year, increase by nine students in the next year, then go down to 1,118 in 2018 but back up to 1,150

by Oct. 1, 2020. Elementary school enrollment (now at 2,248) is expected to drop by only five students next year, then fall to 2,209 as of Oct. 1, 2017, then stay at roughly 2,180 for the next three years.

Selected slides from Brenner's presentation

Reorganization of the budget document

This is Brenner's first school budget proposal since he was hired as superintendent last year, and it includes some changes in the way the document is organized.

Michael Feeney, the district's director of finance and operations, described some of the changes, including reorganizing "responsibility centers" (also referred to in the budget as "RC" and numbered) so that not only are individual schools separated out in order to show how their budgets have changed, but spending on technology is given its own "RC" chapter.

On the other hand, RCs for arts, music, gifted students and physical education spending have been eliminated and spending on those programs is now part of each school's budget.

[Bd of Education - Budget 1-5-16](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).