

(Approved as Corrected on February 23, 2010)
MINUTES
BOARD OF EDUCATION
MEETING WITH DARIEN HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITY COUNCIL
FEBRUARY 22, 2010

PLACE:

Darien High School
Room A105
7:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mrs. Westcott, Chair; Mesdames Sartori, Bell, Perticone, Shea, Hagerty-Ross; Mr. Reilly.

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Mr. Plutte, Mr. Whittier

ADMINISTRATION AND FACULTY PRESENT:

Mr. Fital, Superintendent of Schools; Dr. Falcone, Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education; Mr. Haron, Darien High School Principal, Mrs. Dunn, Darien High School Assistant Principal, Mrs. Russo, Darien High School Assistant Principal, Mr. Sullivan, Darien High School Assistant Principal, Jeromy Nelson, Community Council Advisor.

ADMINISTRATION ABSENT:

Dr. Pandolfo, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education, Mr. Huot, Director of Finance.

DARIEN HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITY COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:

Aaron (Aki) Tas, Nicole Granath, Christopher Weihs, Clarke Glavin, Rahul Datta, Stephanie Ko.

CALL TO ORDER

Mrs. Westcott called the meeting to order at 7:40 p.m. She explained that the purpose for tonight's meeting was to have an exchange of ideas between the Darien High School Community Council and the Board of Education. She thanked the administration for arranging tonight's meeting and thanked Mr. Reilly for taking the initiative to bring forward the idea of a meeting with the high school students.

Mr. Reilly commented that the Board of Education would like to hear from the students to get an idea of what is on the minds of the students, what the students see as working well at the high school, and what concerns they may have. He noted that the Board of Education hears from other constituencies and we would like to hear from the students as well. He explained that it would not be the Board's role to directly address student concerns, but that it will be up to the high school administration and Superintendent to determine what ideas they would like to bring forward for consideration.

The following points were made by the Community Council in response to Board questions:

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What is working well at Darien High School?

- The Learning Connections rooms are working well. They are great spaces for kids and teachers to connect. They make the teachers more accessible and the learning more personalized. They also provide space for student-to-student learning. They can help alleviate the overcrowding in the library. The science research room is valuable for this reason as well. Not all students avail themselves of the Learning Connections rooms.
- The library is the central hub of the school. At one time, it was the cafeteria.

What makes a student successful at Darien High School?

- Students who are successful at Darien High School are those who can use the resources there to their best advantage. It is important to find an activity or program that you love and stick to it to become good at it. There is a wide breadth of clubs and activities. It can be overwhelming at first, but there are helpful ways for students to find their passion. There is a club fair and an activity fair. Sometimes a teacher who is a club advisor can help steer a student to an activity where they will thrive. Students also influence younger siblings in the choice of activities.
- Students may struggle to find their way, but at Darien High School students push each other to get involved. Ultimately, the students find their place. This is a tribute to the variety of clubs and activities.
- Being surrounded by people who are motivated is an incentive to students to find their own interests and ways to be involved.

What about the pressure? Do students know how to dial it down?

- There is stress at the high school, but a student's success depends on how to balance the academics and the activities. The extra curriculars are outlets for the stress.
- The pressure is greater in junior and senior year.
- The use of Aspen has increased stress. Students are able to frequently access their grades and calculate GPA. The benefit of Aspen has been that teachers post grades on a more timely basis and a student can adjust his / her work schedule accordingly. For example, if a student is able to continually reference grades in a class, he /she may be able to put his/ her efforts into a class where the grades are dropping.
- According to a news article, at a high school in Wellesley, Massachusetts the principal found ways to build in times for students to de-stress and it was successful.
- Students do not feel that they have independence at school. If they had more independence, they might feel less stress.
- Darien High School is a place where students "sink or swim", whereas in middle school there was more structure in place to keep a watch on students. There are no homework checks in high school. Middlesex built a foundation of skills that are to be used in high school.
- In high school, students are expected to know what the teacher's expectations are. You learn at your own pace and you find what works best for you. This is appropriate in high school.

Do teachers use websites at Darien High School?

- While middle school teachers post websites and encourage student access, high school

teachers do not necessarily have websites; students in high school do not necessarily need teacher websites. Students take notes on what the teachers say in class.

What do you see as differences between 400 and 300 level classes?

- Some felt that teachers in AP / Honors classes are more well versed in their subject matter. They know their stuff and communicate it better. They are stronger teachers in general. Others said that the 300 level teachers were among their best and it is all about what the student puts into it.
- The quality in the 300 level classes is more variable. You do not have to do as much to do well in a 300 level class.
- When compared to 400 level classes, it was noted that 300 level classes move at a much slower pace. In 300 level classes the subject matter is spoon-fed; there are handouts with notes, whereas in the 400 level classes the teacher uses a lecture method and students take notes on their own. The pace in AP classes goes too fast. A 350 level would be ideal.

Are there discipline issues?

- There are some. There were more discipline issues in 9th grade when classes were comprised of a mix of students who were not always as motivated as others.

Is there enough variety in the classes offered?

- There is an almost over whelming variety, but there are some areas of interest that have not been addressed. For example, different types of pre engineering and applied science would be useful. Sometimes the choice of an elective such as band can be all consuming. Since band is a class, a student who wants to continue with music does not have room for any other elective.
- Students in Darien do not have the skills in grammar and English composition that they need. Often teachers of foreign language have to explain these skills because they have not been taught in English classes. Students from other towns are more familiar with these skills.

How can students find adult mentors? What guidance is available?

- Sometimes a club advisor can be a mentor. Some students find a favorite teacher and continue to build a mentor type relationship with that teacher. Students often ask teachers who have advised them for college recommendations. Homeroom meets very infrequently so these periods are not considered times for mentoring or advice.
- In some school districts guidance is very hands on in providing direction to students and teachers on how best to address student needs. It would be helpful for Darien to strike a balance between the over involvement of guidance that exists in some towns and the less frequent contact that exists in Darien.
- Darien students would benefit from better support in this area. Sometimes the scheduling of appointments is very difficult. This is especially problematic when the need for advice or support is immediate.
- It is important for the guidance counselor to know the student since the guidance counselor writes the college recommendation.
- Many students feel that guidance, including the secretarial staff is very helpful.

- Some students have little need for the guidance staff as freshmen and sophomores, but it is important for them to be there when needed.
- Sometimes younger students slip under the radar when the counselors are concentrating on the juniors and seniors as they get ready for college.

How familiar are students with resources available for students in trouble or for someone who has, for example, a substance abuse problem?

- While the Community Council members said they believe there is a school psychologist available, they were not sure whether students generally know about that resource or other resources available to them. It was agreed that some students who need these resources would know about them, but for reasons of confidentiality the Community Council members are not aware of whether such students use them.

Do you think that some students at Darien High School feel disenfranchised? How can they be helped?

- Some students do feel disenfranchised. How to address this depends on what is behind the feeling of being disenfranchised. Some students have a great deal of trouble with stress. It would be helpful to have more openness about what resources are open to them. Some students are less motivated.
- An adult mentor would be helpful. So would a place where students can gather.
- Some community council students are working on recommendations from the assets-based study done by the Search Institute.
- Sometimes a student leader will take a new student under her wing to introduce him /her to the other students and help the new student find activities that interest him/her.

Do the extra curricular drive social life?

- They do to a certain extent. Students with similar interests tend to like to be with each other.
- When you are around so many people you make friends.
- Kids do get separated into the 300 level and the 400 level so you do tend to see only those students that have the same class schedule.
- Some students like having out of school friends as well as in school friends.

This has been a great start to opening conversation with the high school students. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

- Open ends / open campus. Darien students would benefit from this option.
- New Canaan has had this available for students for several years.
- It would provide more independence for students.
- There are various explanations for why Darien eliminated this privilege. Some feel parents would not like it. Others cite the history of things that have happened in the distant past. Some feel that it would be a liability issue.
- Suggestions that might make the idea more appealing include: making open campus a privilege for seniors only, requiring parent permission, basing it on grades. Another possibility would be to have limited open ends; students would be required to be at school

between 8:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. for example, but the times before and after that could be considered open end.

- Open campus would relieve over crowding in the library and in the parking lots. There would be fewer cars at drop off and pick up times.
- Conversely, closed campus provides more time for interaction among students and teachers.

Mrs. Westcott said that she hoped we would have these conversations on a more regular basis.

Mr. Reilly said that the Board now feels that they have a better handle on what is important to high school students. He cautioned that it was not the Board of Education's intention to over ride the high school administration and anything that comes to the Board will come through the administration.

ADJOURNMENT

- ** MR. REILLY MOVED TO ADJOURN.**
- ** MRS. SHEA SECONDED.**
- ** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting was adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Clara Sartori

Secretary