



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

Good Evening. My name is Shelly Skoglund and I live at 139 Leroy. I have two children: one at the high school and one at Middlesex. My name is Julia Mengwall and I live at 13 Tokeneke Trail. I have three children: one at Middlesex and two at Tokeneke. Together, Shelly and I are co-chairs of the Council of Darien School Parents.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight. We would like to start by thanking the Board of Education for giving so much of your volunteer time to improve our schools and your dedication to the education of all our children. As stewards of our district, your efforts provide the oversight and guidance to keep our district moving forward and we appreciate all you do.

We'd also like to express our gratitude to our teachers, principals and everyone who works to make the Darien Public school system the wonderful place that it is for our children. In particular, we have to acknowledge Dr. Brenner, Dr. DaSilva, Shirley Klein and the entire leadership team that has been assembled over the past two years. We have been thoroughly impressed with their professionalism, commitment to excellence and genuine care for our children and our town. We have also appreciated your work with other town bodies, such as the Board of Finance and the RTM, to support district initiatives. Thank you all for giving of yourselves so tirelessly on our behalf.

To start, we would like to express our support for the Superintendent's proposed budget for 2017-18. As you will hear tonight, our members are enthusiastic about the initiatives included in this budget. We are supportive of the district's goals and objectives which will be reinforced with this spending. We believe that this budget is respectful of all taxpayers while balancing the need to continue to invest in our schools and our children.

The proposed budget is only a 2.02% increase over last year's approved budget. We are fully aware of the extreme financial difficulties facing our state and the potential for our town to sustain a significant financial burden. However, we cannot lose sight of the need to protect the asset that keeps our community strong and attractive to incoming residents - Darien's public schools. While our community may have to make some sacrifices, we cannot sacrifice our schools.

For years, CDSP has been covering many of the same themes at these hearings: the need for transparency and accountability, differentiation to meet all learners at their



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

level, smoother and more thoughtful transition planning between school levels, and communication to parents. We are very pleased to say that we have seen real progress in some of these areas, and are hopeful that some of the initiatives in this year's budget will bring us even closer to our goals.

Last year, we labeled the theme of the budget as Redefinition. This year, we feel that this budget is finally about Reimagination. How can we use technology to build 21st century skills? How can we propagate academic excellence in our secondary schools? How can we create environments that address the very real social and emotional challenges of our youth?

As we move forward, we still see a lot of work to be done. As the Department Chairs provide the promise for greater consistency and improved transitions between middle school and high school, we would also like to see the district focus on parity in other ways: for example, standards of practice regarding homework from class to class within elementary schools and middle school teams; and faithfulness to curriculum between elementary schools and classrooms.

It is still too early in the process for parents to opine on the proposal for the Alternative High School. However, we recognize Dr. Brenner's unique experience in this area and we are interested to learn more details about the program, including its location and its potential to help Darien students as well as generate revenue for the district.

In regards to the long awaited Facilities Master Plan, we would ask the district to keep in mind not just the pressing needs for maintenance, but the need to provide some level of basic parity among the schools. We want to understand what the requirements are, particularly for our elementary schools: What are the appropriate classroom sizes? How should specials be delivered in the elementary setting? What common areas are required in elementary schools and how large do they need to be? Minimal work will **HAVE** to be done to assure that children in all five elementary schools have a similar, not identical, experience with regards to their physical setting.

We would also ask the Board to consider **HOW** you will convert the Master Plan into an Action Plan within a reasonable amount of time. Your leadership will be required to set goals, establish criteria for decision-making and to set and achieve timelines for moving forward. Parents have patiently waited for the planning process to be completed and now we want to see action.



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

Moving ahead parents want to see more data about how the different initiatives are affecting students. For example, we would like to see evidence that the Department Chairs have impacted teacher quality and retention. We would like to know how the restructuring of 300 level classes at DHS has impacted student outcomes. Overall, we want to believe that district decisions are data driven and that meaningful outcomes are defined prior to implementation of new programs. Discipline in decision making and greater transparency will provide the entire community with greater confidence in budget proposals.

We are grateful to all the members of CDSP for their dedication to this process. Tonight, you will be hearing from our members on several topics of importance to our community including: the need for Guidance Counselors and Department Chairs in our schools, the proposed DHS cafeteria project and facilities planning. The Council of Darien School Parents stands here tonight in support of this budget because it represents forward-looking initiatives that we believe will bring excellence to our children at every level. We urge you to make that vision a reality for every single one of our students.



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

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 Street, and I have a tenth 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 2017/2018 budget, specifically as it pertains to DHS.

Darien's commitment to excellence in public education is why many of us chose to live here. I submit that the quality of our school system is the bedrock of our community and why we must move forward and strengthen the quality of education at Darien High School and the whole district.

We wish to acknowledge and support Principal Dunn and her team at DHS for their work enhancing and enriching the learning experience within the framework of a responsible and well planned budget. Program growth in areas such as technology and guidance counselors, affirm Darien High School as the flagship high school not only of our town, but I submit, of the State of Connecticut.

There is one particular area of concern -- the challenge to the proposed Darien High School cafeteria expansion. A cafeteria is more than a place to eat. It is where our students gather with their peers and it creates an important sense of community. Principal Dunn has spoken of having the cafeteria evolve into more of a Student Center - a central gathering place for academic collaboration and social community. Darien High School students need this.

I am troubled that we are even having this debate now. This project was approved last year by both the Board of Education and Board of Finance, and was held in abeyance as a good-faith accommodation due to the unpredictable financial situation in Hartford. While Hartford's support for Darien was in question then, the defined need for the cafeteria expansion was not. I could not understand delaying a project when the need for it would knowingly become only more acute, and when it could only become more expensive.

The fact is undisputed that Darien High School needs to expand its cafeteria. The cafeteria issue is not new. It seems to have been forgotten that the school was designed with two cafeterias to meet the enrollment when it opened. Today's cafeteria dysfunction originated with the repurposing of the "second" cafeteria space some years ago. The problem has only become more acute with the surge in enrollment, which itself, is getting worse.

It is time to fix the problem which has been there for years. The need for expansion existed last year. The need exists this year. The need will continue to exist in years to come. Others this evening will set the record straight about the practical reality of the overcrowding. 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.



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

There have been suggestions that expansion is not necessary, and that alternatives have not been explored. The fact that there are some lunch “waves” which are larger than others, does not, in fact, support this assertion. Rebalancing of lunch shifts beyond that which currently exists (which we do not concede is practical) would require that enrollment in certain classes be capped, and that students may not be able to take classes of their choice, or that required curriculum be put off due to class size limitation, all because of lunch scheduling based on the fact that the cafeteria is too small. I ask, rhetorically, does Darien want to tell students that their curricular needs are subordinate to the restrictions of the cafeteria? I think not. This proves our point that maintaining the current cafeteria capacity, by definition, fails to meet the educational needs of Darien High School students. Expansion is the only solution and offers our town solid value as long as it is done right, again, the first time. Now.

In sum, we believe that the targeted investments in the Proposed Budget, most especially the Darien High School cafeteria expansion, will allow Darien to maintain the excellence which it demands from its schools. We caution against illusions of short-term savings that ultimately result in higher costs, wasted taxpayer dollars, and the compromise of long-term goals and objectives.

Thank you.

**Ben Hayes**

**6 Tanglewood Trail**

**Senior at Darien High School and I always eat lunch in the cafeteria.**

**We get 28 mins for lunch – this is the only social and relaxation time we get all day – there is no time at all in between classes, and because of my subjects, I get hardly any frees. I value the chance to see my friends and take a breather. I have often not been able to get a seat in the cafeteria, have had to search for a chair elsewhere, and then bring it to where my friends are and eat on my lap.**

**The only time teachers send us to the wrong lunch wave is when we are sitting a long test. For academic integrity and to keep our train of thought we cannot stop half way through the test, go to lunch and then pick up where we left off. Especially in AP classes, taking longer tests is important preparation for the AP exams and we want to be able to do them un-interrupted. I don't think cafeteria overcrowding should effect our ability to take these long tests.**

Hello, my name is Jason Gaaserud. I live at 35 Driftway Lane and I am here to give my perspective on the DHS Cafeteria. The fact of the matter is, the cafeteria is too crowded. Today I went to the cafeteria for lunch, and because there was no room for me to sit, I went somewhere else to eat. Other times, when there is enough room, I have had to stand by tables until a seat opens up. Once I even shared a chair with someone. Unfortunately, these experiences are typical for DHS Students-not the exception.

I think transforming the cafeteria into a student center would be a great way to improve the atmosphere at school. There is no real place at the school that is good for hanging out while one does not have classes, but I think the cafeteria could fulfil this role. DHS students deserve a better cafeteria with enough room for all of us.

Avery Brook  
27 Lake Drive  
DHS Senior and Community Council President

I eat every day in the cafeteria. For me, 4<sup>th</sup> lunch seems to be the biggest issue. There is very little seating to be found. This is due to teachers sending their kids to 4<sup>th</sup> lunch after testing. There is definitely a lack of space at tables and many times I have had to share a seat with a friend. The cafeteria is very noisy and it can be hard to talk to people. I believe that more space is needed to deal with the peak lunch waves and an extension would hopefully help the noise issue and make it easier for everyone to talk to each other.

~~Liz Borecki  
62 Fitch Avenue  
DHS Senior and Community Council Member~~



My name is Alex Swift. I live at 177 Leroy Avenue . I am a Junior at DHS.

I am here in support of the proposed expansion of the Darien High School Cafeteria. Having been at DHS for 2 1/2 years now, I manage to get through the day without having a place to sit at lunch. I know that walking through the school during power hour, there are kids sitting on the floor in different hallways. Looking for a chair, may take up to 5 minutes.

It may not sound like a long time, but it really is a lot when you only have 20 minutes because a teacher has gone over time, or you stayed to ask a few questions about tomorrow's test. Half the student body seems to have to share a chair with one if not 2 people, crowded around a single table.

I have a sister who is a freshman. Of all the heads up I could give her about the high school, it seems that finding a seat at lunch is one that I should not really have to give. I am grateful to be at DHS, and there are so many wonderful things to be proud of. I just think this is something that should not even be a question. As a member of post 53, you hear all the time about the dangers of overcrowding. Simply put, the cafeteria is too small for all of the students in the high school.

**Robert Garrett**

**68 Stony Brook Road**

**Senior at Darien High School and I always eat in the cafeteria**

**I see people eating all over the school – some by choice, some in order to have study groups, some because of lack of seats in the cafeteria. These areas are not set up for eating and can make our school a real mess. I've walked through these areas many times after power hour and seen the mess that is left behind. Some lunch waves are certainly busier than others, and it can be hard to find a spot at a table. I think that the cafeteria should have the space to accommodate everyone.**

Hi. My name is Ben Olson. My address is 16 Little Brook Rd. N. I am a freshman at Darien High School

During lunch:

- Students grab chairs and put them around 3-4 tables leaving the other tables without chairs.
- Many students have to sit 2-3 kids per chair making it hard but I imagine even harder if you have few friends to share a chair with.
- We used to sit outside but now, with the cold weather, the chairs are gone so if we can't find a seat in the lunchroom we eat our lunch walking around the halls.

School is stressful enough without adding the stress of not having a seat at lunch.

Thank you.



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

Good evening, my name is Ann Dickson and I live at 6 Sunnyside Avenue. I have an 11th grader at DHS and a college freshman who graduated last year. I am speaking tonight on behalf of the parents of Darien High School students. There are two issues of particular concern to us and we hope that by addressing these issues we will create a more equitable and supportive environment for our children.

For years we have been hearing parents complain about inconsistency among classes and a lack of attention to the sometimes problematic transition between 8th grade and 9th grade. We are encouraged that the administration and Board have heard these concerns. We firmly support the recommendation to provide additional curriculum supervision and evaluative support with the creation of the Department Chair position. Our reasons for supporting this change are to provide both a better educational experience for our children and to allay some of the administrative burden which currently falls to the building principals. The parents see real value in subject experts providing support, coaching, and evaluation to teachers in their subject.

Under the current curriculum monitor model, students in different sections of the same course may experience varying consistency of content, testing and marking, and assignment deadlines. We would like to see a model, under which one subject expert would be responsible for overseeing classroom teaching and course content, and would give students the same experiences and opportunities across all sections. The benefits of consistency are many, not the least of which will be insuring that all students receive the same preparation in one grade that will provide for their success as they advance to the next. We see many of our children struggle with the transition from 8th to 9th grade so we would value a system that better integrates the curriculums and requirements of middle and high school.

Similarly, we endorse the addition of a Special Education Department Chairperson working at the secondary level. Much in the same way Curriculum Department Chairs will be supporting teachers, this person would have the ability to make sure that best special education teaching practices are followed when it comes to making accommodations and modifications, so that children with special education needs can access the academic curriculum. In the same way that *all* students should have the same experience across different sections of the same course, students with special education needs should have access to the same high quality instructional practices no matter who their teacher is. There is also a need for a Special Education Department Chairperson to establish a seamless transition process that prepares students who are entering Darien High School and provides them with the skills necessary to access the high school curriculum. We ask that the Administration consider the scope of work that this position entails. We believe that one Special Education Department Chairperson for grades 6 – 12 may not be enough, due to the student caseload, the different environments in middle and high school, and the fact that these individuals will also need to work closely with department chairs and regular education teachers as well.



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

In addition, the current budget proposal requests an additional guidance counselor whose time would be evenly divided between Middlesex and the high school. The unique needs of the student population at DHS cannot be met by only a part-time counselor so we strongly believe that an additional full time guidance counselor at the high school is necessary.

The academic demands and social pressures for our students at the high school are great. We entrust our guidance counselors with providing the support our children require to navigate the complexities of the teenage years. One of the roles of the guidance counselor is to be the front line of defense of our children's well being and we believe it is important to invest money into our children's mental health.

Not only are the high school guidance counselors serving in a supportive, problem solving capacity for our children, they are also overseeing the college application process for most. Over the past several years, the college application process has been more complex with the increased number of early decision and early action options along with an increased number of applications overall per student. Each guidance counselor is responsible for writing recommendations for each of their students. With responsibility for more and more students, it becomes more difficult for the guidance counselors to get to know each of these students as individuals.

DHS guidance counselors are also supporting our children with the Advisory program which is in its second year. Students and parents alike have found this program to be instrumental in providing information and developing a tighter relationship between students and counselors. Certainly, our guidance counselors have put considerable time and effort into the development and implementation of the Advisory program.

As parents, we firmly support Department Chairs and a full time guidance counselor at the high school. We hope that these initiatives will address our concerns and deliver the excellent education we want for our children.



Good evening, my name is Theresa Vogt. I live at 22 Circle Road and I am the CDSP Rep for Middlesex. I have two children in our schools: my daughter is a freshman at DHS and my son is a 7th grader at Middlesex. I am here tonight to voice the Middlesex parent community's strong support for the addition of a full-time guidance counselor at Middlesex, as well as the addition of Department Chairs for grades 6-12.

Recognizing that our guidance departments are very much used, yet under-staffed (there are only five guidance counselors at Middlesex, three of whom have over 240 students assigned to them, with one 7th grade counselor having 275 students), the current proposed budget currently asks for one additional guidance counselor to be shared between the high school and middle school. While we appreciate the financial reasons behind only asking for one shared guidance counselor, we believe the best use of our dollars would be to invest in one person for each school.

There is so much more to the role of a Guidance Counselor than helping families navigate the college process. The Guidance Counselors at Middlesex and DHS are the constant in our students' lives as they navigate everyday life; and the lives and challenges of a middle schooler are very different than those of a high schooler.

This is my third year standing up here to advocate for the middle school and in all those years, the administration of Middlesex has asked for additional resources to support the wellbeing of our students. I looked at the first speech I made two years ago and my words then still resonate today: the three years in middle school are the three toughest years for most students, developmentally and emotionally. These are the years when our kids are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in. Under the best of circumstances, these are difficult years. Some students have learning differences to contend with, some have less than ideal situations at home, and for most, middle school is their first introduction to social media. As for that last one, there may be no group that understands the pitfalls of the social media learning curve on the lives of our kids than the Middlesex administration and Guidance department because whether we like it or not, what our kids experience outside of school still follows them to school.

Our new Principal, Shelley Somers, believes the addition of the counselor is critical to the school. During her first year here, she has already made changes in the work of this department, giving the Guidance Counselors even more of a front-line role with parents and, hopefully, next year rolling out an advisory program modeled after the highly successful program at DHS. These changes will continue to tax an already highly stretched department.

Walk into the Guidance Department at Middlesex and I can assure you that you will find students in the offices of their counselors either seeking advice or a place where they can feel safe while they work through a moment of anxiety. It is a testament to our middle school guidance department that our kids consider them a go-to. That said, no child can time their crisis, nor should we expect them to have to turn to another guidance counselor because they were assigned to one who is shared with DHS. As a parent who has personal experience working closely with the guidance department, I can tell you that there were days when I felt better knowing that my child's guidance counselor was simply in the building. Adding only one counselor to split their time between DHS and Middlesex is not fair to our students or our families.

Our support for Department Chairs is another investment in our students. How many times have we discussed ways to ease the transition from 5th to 6th grade and then from 8th to 9th grade, and yet despite our best efforts, we continue to hear parents complain about 6th grade math and 9th grade reading comprehension and writing skills. Between Middlesex and DHS, 12 teachers coordinate six different academic departments. At Middlesex, those Curriculum Monitors (as they are called there) carry a full course load and have no release time. They are not certified to assess their fellow teachers, so while they all do an excellent job of putting forth a curriculum that meets our high standards and one that should for all intents and purposes flow from one grade to the next with ease, they cannot determine if every teacher is implementing the curriculum equally.

Teacher reviews are conducted by an administration that in addition to not being deeply proficient in all subject areas, must deal with unexpected crises, while overseeing the everyday of their buildings. What falls by the wayside in that? Teacher reviews. As a result, you will hear parents and students complain that there is no parity among the teams. Grading is inconsistent, homework loads different, testing on the same content can happen weeks apart depending on the teacher. You will hear some kids say they were better prepared for the next grade because they were on a tough team or you will hear others boast that they don't get a lot of homework. This all matters. As much as we don't like to admit it, middle school matters as grades in 7th and 8th grade impact placement heading into 9th, and in some cases, 10th grade.

The Department Chair role, as we understand it, will fix these gaps and inconsistencies and in turn make the transition into and out of Middlesex as fluid as we all want and expect it to be.

The Special Education Chairperson will support children with special education needs in a similar way. Many parents feel that there is disparity between their child's education plan and the implementation of that plan. Consistent professional development, coaching and evaluations will provide our teachers with the tools they need to fully implement each student's individual educational plans and ensure that they have access to the curriculum. The Special Education Department Chairperson should also have the ability to enhance the transition process, to both middle school and high school, to ensure that each student's services and accommodations are appropriate to achieve success in each learning environment.

Thank you.



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

**Curriculum:**

Good Evening. My name is Sara Goertel and I live at 22 Brushy Hill Road. I have 3 of my 4 children at Tokeneke school. I'm going to speak this evening about initiatives important to the parents of elementary school students.

The three initiatives I would like to focus on tonight are: Professional Development, Library/Maker Spaces, and transitions from Pre-K to Kindergarten and from 5th to 6th Grade.

*Professional Development:*

As parents, we believe the most important factor contributing to our children's success is the quality of teaching. We strongly support the continued investment in the professional development of our educators. We want our teachers exposed to evidence-based "best practice" teaching strategies and the most effective methods for reaching all different types of learners in the classroom.

- We agree with the focus of spending this year on science, social studies, gifted education, math and health education, as well as specific training for priority content areas (Orton-Gillingham, Wilson, SRBI training, etc.)
- We would like to encourage the administration, through this professional development and other efforts, to continue to strive for consistency across schools: pacing of curriculum, amount and type of homework, etc.
- At the same time, we expect this professional development to help strengthen practices for differentiation within classrooms/per student.
- Along with investments in professional development, parents would like to see measurement, tracking and reporting on the success of these initiatives.

Let's continue to build our schools as places where both teachers and students learn and grow.

*Library/Maker Spaces:*

We are excited about the possibility of reimagining our libraries as 21st century maker spaces.

- What is the vision for what these LLCs or maker spaces will eventually become? Do we have models for schools doing this successfully that we are looking to emulate? By beginning with the end in mind, we can better map how to get there together.
- Additionally, we need to have some discussion on how and when the elementary school children will be able use the libraries. We expect our kids are going to be very excited about these new spaces! Will they be able to go before and/or after school? Will there be curriculum to support the spaces? Will the maker spaces support the curriculum?

We look forward to working with you to further define the plans make these spaces a reality.

*Transitions:*

Parents would like to keep looking for ways to help our children make the transitions from pre-school to Kindergarten and from Elementary School to Middle School more seamless.





Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

- Key areas of concern in the Pre-K to K transition seem to be: parent expectations regarding communication, planning coordination between ELP and the receiving team, the need to better educate parents about the individual plans for their children, and the general expectations for the new setting.
- Regarding the 5th to 6th Transition, we believe that having consistent practices and expectations across the five schools will help all new 6th graders start on the same path for success.
  - We would like to see – not *more!*– but more *thoughtful* homework assignments, emphasis on time, project management, and study skills, and better preparation for the rigor they'll face at Middlesex.
  - We are excited by new efforts like having the 5th graders attend the Middlesex musical dress rehearsal to start getting the kids in the building sooner.
  - We encourage more ideas like this as it not only makes Middlesex less of a mystery to the kids but also gives them another chance to feel like the young adults they are becoming.

Parents want to know that instructional initiatives are based on research and best practice data; include a comprehensive professional development plan; and provide clear measures of success by which parents can understand the progress of their child. We look forward to more communication on the success of these initiatives.



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

Hello. My name is Sara Parent. I live at 227 Hollow Tree Ridge Road and have two children at Holmes School. I would like to speak to you tonight about our elementary school facilities.

Darien is a vibrant community that places a high value on academic excellence and we applaud your efforts to invest in our school facilities. We fully support all of the individual capital projects laid out in the current budget. However, we view these as only a starting point and urge you to look at the bigger picture. We, the parents of Darien public school students, feel the capital conversation needs to have a much larger focus than just what is currently proposed.

Public school buildings are a part of a community's permanent infrastructure—usually lasting for many generations. The school building itself—the place where people and programs converge—can support quality education, or obstruct it. The school facility is much more than a passive location of the educational process. It is, rather, an integral component of the conditions of learning. Substandard school buildings reflect poorly on the people and programs that are housed in them. Conversely, attractive, well maintained, educationally appropriate school facilities support teaching and learning and enhance the community.

The list of parent concerns regarding our school facilities is quite extensive. How many more years to do our children need to spend in what most of us would deem sub-par building facilities, given the high standard we apply to other aspects of our lives and that of our children's lives? What is the minimum standard that we have for our school facilities? How many more years must teachers be in classrooms that are well below appropriate square footage? School facilities affect teacher recruitment, retention, commitment, and effort - all of which directly affects our children.

Additionally, many of our elementary schools have a heating problem. The drastic variation in temperature between classrooms in the same building is shocking. Some basic level of heat control must be a priority. With regards to air conditioning, while we understand that getting central A/C in all of our buildings is not currently possible, it is worthwhile to point out that there are in fact extreme temperature issues within many of the elementary school classrooms in September and August and again in May and June. We strongly believe that this lends itself to a lack of productivity and learning from the students and teachers. If A/C is not possible, certainly window units in every class room must be an option, and we believe that an upgrade to our schools' wiring and power issues needs to be immediately addressed to make this possible.

The portables are an enormous safety concern. To use the bathroom, young children must leave the portable and walk outside, unsupervised, in order to get to the main building. These portables have also far surpassed their life expectancy, and are no longer a conducive learning space. They also pose a vulnerable risk in the event of a lock down, given their location. The learning experience in portables is compromised by poor lighting, erratic temperatures and/or



Council of Darien School Parents P.O. Box 2643, Darien, CT 06820

noisy heating and air conditioning. Our portables were meant to be temporary yet they are still used as if they were part of the brick and mortar building.

It has also become clear through these capital discussions, that there is not parity amongst our schools as it relates to facilities. This will be further exacerbated with the proposed rebuild of Ox Ridge School. Soon, Darien will have two elementary schools with heating and cooling, an updated look and feel, best practice room sizes, along with many other aspects of a new building. The three old buildings wouldn't even come close to the standard of the other two. While we know these three other schools do not need a complete rebuild, we want to be sure that the look and feel of all the elementary schools will be on par with each other.

Parity should also consider what functional spaces exist in each building. For example, specials teachers - such as foreign language, art and music - should have their own dedicated classrooms at all of our schools, each and every year. The new Ox Ridge will be built with a more technology-driven library/makerspace. It will be critical for the remaining schools to be brought up to the same standard.

With the proposal of multiple new building developments in our town, we have to be prepared for enrollment to rise. Given the uncertainty we encourage the board to think ahead and plan for what may be coming rather than building only what we need right now. We must avoid the mistakes of recent projects where we found ourselves overcapacity within a year of opening the high school and Tokeneke. Furthermore, the common rooms/cafeterias in our elementary schools which are used for school assemblies are small and, in some cases, not even large enough to accommodate the current student population.

Also, at present, the ELP program has eight classes spread out over three elementary schools, which is inefficient for educational cohesiveness and wasteful from a cost perspective. Having a dedicated space to house the entire ELP program, would alleviate these concerns.

We are aware that architects have drafted drawings to start this process, however, we would like to see a more definitive plan and timeline for the overall project. Five more years of small capital fixes ignores the greater issue of existing space constraints and poor facilities conditions and is unacceptable. We would like a plan from the Board that addresses many of the issues outlined here. While improving facilities comes at a financial cost, we believe the benefits of such an investment will surpass the initial fiscal burden. When the positive impacts of facility improvements are felt by the teachers and students, the rewards far outweigh the cost. It would also be prudent to take advantage of low interest rates as rates will likely rise over the next few years. Whatever the future holds for education, our buildings need to adapt to meet these demands. We have a vision of new and improved schools, looking beyond what currently is, to imagine what could —and should —be.

February 2, 2017

Members of the RTM and Board of Education -

My name is Bridget Bepler. I live at 19 Lake Drive and have three children in the Darien schools, two attend Holmes now and all three will be there next year. I am here tonight speaking on behalf of the parents of Holmes School.

While we realize that tonight's discussion is mainly about next year's budget, we would like to look forward and ask you to be proactive in your facilities planning as you continue with discussions about the master plan later this spring and next year.

We are aware that Holmes is projected to have an added section for next year. There is currently nowhere in the building to house this additional section, and there are no funds in this year's proposed budget to solve this problem. This leaves the administration to consider less than satisfactory alternatives as next year looms. A creative, "Band-Aid" solution will have to be created for next year, most likely at the expense of some aspect of our children's education. We certainly applaud you for beginning these important discussions about the future of our schools, but we ask you to widen your lens as the master plan is finalized, and to work to ensure that situations such as this do not happen again at Holmes, or at any school in Darien.

We would like to see a dedicated classroom for each special subject as well as classrooms with proper square footage for optimal instruction in each elementary school in town. Currently, Holmes does not have a classroom for each of its specials subjects. IDEA is currently housed in a small room that can hold 12 students and should be in a larger space. The resource rooms used for more individualized instruction are literally small, converted closets. Building on four classrooms to Holmes would provide the ability to remove the portables, and have an appropriate number of classrooms for the needs of our students. We are excited about the possibilities that exist in the master plan and look forward to more discussion about how to best improve Darien's schools.

I thank you for your attention and time.

## BOE Budget Speech-February 2, 2017

Good evening we are Courtney Darby and Tricia Bresnahan, co-chairs of the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee, SEPAC, and Kelly Dupont, Linda Straubel and Wendy Hopper, SEPAC representatives.

We would like to thank Shirley Klein, Scott McCarthy and Dr. Brenner and other school administrators for working collaboratively with our committee to hear the concerns of all Darien parents – and to help all students learn effectively.

We would also like to thank the many educators and administrators who work tirelessly and effectively to help our students achieve their potential.

We are relaying the concerns and input we have received from many parents in the district.

In order to get a true sense of challenges kids face but protect student privacy, we will start with three composite students who share similarities with many students in our district but are not one student in particular.

### Meet Jack

Jack is 9 years old and in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. He is reading at a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level and making minimal progress. His classmates ask him why he is reading books that they read when they were “little.”

### Meet Sarah

Sarah is 11 years old and in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She has been behind her peers academically for years. Sarah was not identified with a learning disability until the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade – and because she could not catch up she had to leave all of her friends after 5<sup>th</sup> grade to attend a new school. Sarah would rather attend school in her own town and be with her friends. She worries constantly if she will ever be able to come back.

### Meet Andrew

Andrew is 15 years old and in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He has a hard time talking to peers and teachers. Andrew struggles with the vast amount of content he is expected to learn. He has been told that he is responsible for scheduling tests in alternate settings or talking to his teachers about his IEP modifications and accommodations. Some teachers seem to understand that he learns differently, but some make him consistently ask for notes and study guides for every test and assignment. Many times he gets these study guides late, which makes him even more anxious and leaves him with less time to study or accomplish

assignments.

Tonight we are here to show support for four main areas in the budget. At the same time we are asking for greater transparency and detail in these budget areas.

## (1) Professional Development

We'd like to express our support for Clearly Spelled Out Professional Development in Reading, Writing, Assistive Technology and Co-Teaching

### Reading

High rates of outplacement for reading disabilities and students who are still struggling in late elementary school indicate that it is important to gain a better understanding of reading resources – in particular Orton Gillingham and Wilson training.

Parents need answers to the following questions: At each school -- How many special education teachers – and general education teachers -- have been trained in OG? How many have been trained in Wilson? How long does a child try one program before moving to another? How many students are using each approach? And what is the data on how successful these reading programs have been in helping students progress and close the gap?

We need to invest in highly effective specialized reading instruction or else we will continue to pay significant dollars in outplacement.

### Writing

Writing is a multifaceted task that requires the coordination of many skills and cognitive processes. Due to this complex process – many students, including those with learning disabilities, find writing challenging. The current reader's and writer's workshop model does not provide the specialized instruction needed. These students require explicit, evidence-based instruction in writing. We urge the district to invest in professional development on research-based writing programs.

### Assistive Technology

At a recent SEPAC meeting, Lori Ritvo and Christina Stauble, district Assistive Technology Coordinators and Special Education Speech and Language Pathologists, presented to a large crowd of parents an array of assistive technology tools that could help students better access the curriculum. Parents

were excited to learn about these AT features to help struggling students, however they were also frustrated that many teachers are not aware or well-trained in these tools – and that students are also not given adequate training or time to learn the tools. We are excited about the roll out of the 1 to 1 devices, but hope that all students will be trained to use these devices to the best of their ability. Currently expertise resides in pockets throughout the district and the manpower and time for training are lacking. We ask the district to devote sufficient professional development and manpower to assistive technology.

### Co-taught classes

We support and are excited about the professional development being given by Marilyn Friend in the co-taught teaching model at the high school this year. We were encouraged to hear she will work with the middle school next year. We urge you to include the elementary level at the same time. The access to co-teaching at the elementary school is uneven, and many students could potentially benefit from this model. It also makes sense to adequately train teachers before assessing the model's effectiveness.

### (2) Support for 2 Guidance Counselors (MMS & DHS)

We would like to express our support for two new guidance counselors – one at Middlesex Middle School and one at Darien High School. School guidance counselors are often the first line of defense when it comes to mental health issues.

Just two weeks ago, more than 130 parents attended a presentation by the Child Mind Institute to learn how to better address student anxiety and worries. Research shows that anxiety disorders affect one in eight children and that untreated students are at higher risk of performing poorly in school, missing out on important social experiences, and engaging in substance abuse.

An adequate number of guidance professionals at the middle and high school levels would provide an important safety net for this vulnerable population. We can't defer this need to a part-time schedule.

In addition, when searching for a new high school guidance counselor, we urge the district to consider a professional who also has expertise in secondary transition, which is required for all students with IEPs after the age of 15.

### (3) Support for full-time psychologist at DHS

We support the budget request for an additional .5 psychologist at DHS. The

position plays a critical role in addressing a range of mental health issues in high school students. In addition, this full-time position is needed to provide careful evaluation and testing expertise.

#### (4) Support for 2 Special Education Department Chairs (MMS & DHS)

We'd like to express our support for two (not just one as proposed) school-based Special Education Department Chairs for MMS & DHS.

The budget book explains that the main role of the 6 Department Chairs is "to ensure a consistent vertical curriculum" "across all curriculum areas." The problem with the special education chair is that there is not a "consistent vertical curriculum" grades 6-12. The role is really about overseeing appropriate access to the curriculum.

If we take a moment to consider the role of the Department Chair for Science--grades 6-12 --we are asking this person to be an expert and supervisor in an expansive range of topics—from parts of the body, to meiosis & mitosis, to the thermodynamic cycle. This involves hundreds of pages of curriculum oversight & supervision --it is not a small task.

So keep in mind, we are asking the special education department chair to provide access to this same expansive curriculum. Simultaneously, they need to provide careful oversight in accessing the curriculum in English, Math, Social Studies, Foreign Language, and if necessary, electives.

If anyone has ever tried to help a child with Biology or Algebra II homework after not seeing the course material for many years---you understand that you can't just jump in and supervise. To help a student you must first understand the subject material.

We need school-based Special Education Department Chairs at DHS and MMS. A Department Chair is not going to be effective at training, articulation and supervision unless they are well versed in ensuring appropriate access to the curriculum at each grade level and in each subject.

#### Alternative School

We agree with the need to address the mental health needs of all of Darien's students. We look forward to hearing more about the plan for the alternative school. We also hope that the needs of our current high school and the space needs of all of our schools are our top priority.

ELP



The Early Learning Program's integrated pre-school program is highly successful and a positive first experience of school for both children with disabilities and without. We support the raise in tuition. In addition, we feel this program needs careful attention. Three locations are difficult at best and the search for a solution needs to be given a higher priority.

Hi. My name is Wendy Hopper and I am speaking to you as a parent of (*3 Darien students, one of whom is dyslexic*). I became a member of SEPAC to help educate myself on what our district offers the dyslexic population, as well as to advocate for more robust early intervention for students with reading difficulties.

My understanding is that Darien has one of the highest populations attending Windward, in addition to the number of students who go to Eagle Hill and other schools, or leave school to receive intensive tutoring at Lindamood-Bell.

Most parents I speak with want to keep their child in their neighborhood school with their siblings, friends and time for afterschool activities. So why do they leave? Often they leave because the school cannot meet their child's needs OR because their child's learning difference was caught too late and they needed more intervention.

Financially, this places a large burden on families, as well as the district through outplacement and litigation.

We are a district with many talented, experienced and well-educated teachers and administrators, and I have seen many administrative improvements, including the addition of SESS facilitators in our buildings and the implementation of Foundations in the early grades.

But I want to share with you that if you are the parent of a child with a learning difference, you need to work twice as hard to make sure that your child is receiving the services they need to be successful and to start closing the gap.

I am concerned that what we currently provide in data collection and Progress Monitoring, Early Intervention using Orton-Gillingham based reading instruction and Teacher Training, is still not enough.

*I often hear parents say that their classroom teacher does not notice anything or thinks that their child is making enough progress, only to find out several years later that their child has fallen behind.* I don't think that teachers are neglectful; most are well-meaning, so I think it comes from a genuine feeling of wanting the child to be successful. So how can our district support teachers in identifying "at risk" students and providing appropriate early intervention and communication with parents?

I also hear parents say that teachers don't really understand dyslexia, and to be fair, it is complicated and challenging to understand. I am in full support of the district's training in Orton-Gillingham based reading instruction for all special education and general education classroom teachers, as it will provide an understanding of reading differences and give

teachers tools to offer students during reading and writing lessons.

Finally, data collection and Progress Monitoring. What does the district have in place to monitor student's progress that is consistent across the district, informs instruction and helps parents understand where their child is compared to their grade-level peers?

My hope is that the district can create a system where struggling readers are identified early, are given appropriate intervention, that data is collected to inform instruction and a child's progress is monitored closely to ensure that the gap is closing.

In the ideal situation, a parent does not need to ask for these things and teachers do not need to reinvent the wheel.

Thank you for your time and your efforts toward improving Special Education services for struggling readers in Darien. I understand that change is a process and I thank you for the positive changes that are in place and look forward to seeing where we can go.

## Vasil, Nadine

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**From:** Harman, Michael A.  
**Sent:** Thursday, February 02, 2017 10:24 PM  
**To:** Vasil, Nadine  
**Subject:** Fwd: For the record

John Sini's comments

Typos courtesy of my iPhone

Begin forwarded message:

**From:** P&Z Gmail <[sini.darienz@gmail.com](mailto:sini.darienz@gmail.com)>  
**Date:** February 2, 2017 at 9:15:20 PM EST  
**To:** [mharman@darienps.org](mailto:mharman@darienps.org)  
**Subject:** For the record

John Sini comments:

I'd like to Make a few points:

First as Chairman of P&Z:

If cafeteria is ultimately deemed in the best interest of our community, it's likely that our commission would like to see the construction done in conjunction with the turf and track replacement project because it would be least disruptive to the surrounding area.

As I've said to a few of you before, our commission will ensure that any application that is in the greater public interest will be prioritized. For example, we approved the Ox Ridge Hunt Club subdivision in one week's time and could ensure a similar timeline for the district with this project.

My message to you as a taxpayer and parent of three boys -- two boys which are educated in the district -- and one that attends Windward -- is the following.

(While we chose to send our youngest to Windward, I have nothing but good things about the district's Special Education efforts)

While I think a new cafeteria and an Alternative school is probably necessary, I'd love to see the BOE spend additional some time convincing the ultimate arbiters of the Town budget - our RTM members and their constituents -- that this is the right capital project and the right education program at the right time.

Lastly, I'd just like to remind everyone the dismal conditions Connecticut's fiscal state is in. Connecticut is number #47 in the nation and there are no signs things will get any better under the current leadership in Hartford, in fact it's only going to get worse for "Gold Coast" town's like Darien.

My general plea is "Please, please think long and hard before you add additional costs to the district's capital and operating budgets."

I spent 18 years in a Long Island public school system without air conditioning and survived -- I am sure my boys can survive without it.

Thanks for your time this evening.

John Sini, Jr.  
Commissioner, Planning & Zoning  
203.969.4133