



March 10, 2020

Good evening. I am Julie Best. I am Sara Parent. We are the co-chairs of CDSP, the Council of Darien School Parents and as such, we represent the entire parent community in Darien. We are here tonight to share our thoughts on the Board of Education's 2020-21 budget.

Darien's schools have seen much transition over the past decade. We are thrilled to stand here this evening and say that we have the utmost confidence in Dr. Addley, and we are already impressed with his leadership and ability to bring different constituencies together. We are lucky to have him.

We are grateful for the many hours spent by the district administration and the Board of Education to develop a budget that allows the Darien Public Schools to continue to offer an excellent education to all Darien students. We believe this budget is lean, financially responsible and maintains the high standards for which Darien is known.

Thanks to your hard work along with that of Darien's other elected officials, Darien is in excellent financial health. We are grateful for your consistent support of Darien's youth, and we know you share our belief that our town's strength is tied directly to the strength of our public school system.

We know you are well aware that the percentage of the budget that represents discretionary spending has been declining in recent years. There are many factors contributing to that decline. One in particular that we want to highlight is the contractual obligations to our teachers. While we made some improvements in the new contract, it is still not enough. Schools are nothing without strong teachers. Darien still has a lot of work to do as a district to prioritize our teachers and staff and to ensure that Darien attracts and retains the best teaching talent.

This budget is coming at a time of great unknowns at all levels: national, state and local. Connecticut's continuing financial struggles mean we can rely less and less on support from the state. Proposals in this year's state legislative session, particularly HB 5433 and its potential change in excess cost funding, could potentially put even more

pressure on our already stretched budget. We gave testimony opposing 5433 in Hartford yesterday, as did Mrs. Ochman and Dr. Addley, in the hope of changing that conversation. Certainly there are funding issues to solve, but it is currently unclear how the change in funding might affect Darien students' outcomes and what programming or innovation could be affected. That is our primary objection.

Locally, we have concerns about the challenge of predicting enrollment accurately. Of late, enrollment numbers seem to be in flux, and we believe we can expect this trend to continue with the new building projects in town. For this year, due to variability across many grades, plus a number of late enrollees, we have many elementary school sections that are above what the district has identified as "optimal". We need to be sure we have adequate resources in budget control to ensure the flexibility to adjust class sections when and as needed.

This year's budget does not include any new and innovative initiatives. We do not see this as a bad thing, as we think allowing Dr. Addley some time to understand the needs of Darien students and staff is imperative to thoughtful stewardship of the district. But looking ahead, and armed with the new strategic plan that is presently being developed, we expect to see good conversation at the Board of Education table about moving the district forward. We hope that the Board of Finance will support this forward progress, as it will most likely not be free.

A final concern would be the relatively low capital expenses in this budget, when we know there is much more to come in the near future. We understand that replacing a roof or overhauling an HVAC system before it is needed is a waste of money. However, it is unfortunate that we are not able to space out these larger projects over time and hope that moving forward we might do better at that. We eagerly await the results of the architect's study on replacing the portables and reimagining our schools' libraries. These endeavors will also come with a large price tag but are much needed and past due.

In closing, we thank you all for your time and your commitment to Darien. More than ever, we need all elected officials and town leaders to be cooperative and collaborative. That means relying on all involved to bring their own areas of expertise to the matters at hand and respecting others to do the same. To that end, we ask that you continue your support of our schools and send a strong message to Darien's residents that you support our Board of Education and the school administration.

Thank you for the chance to speak this evening.