Organizational Meeting of the Board
Speaking Notes for Janet McDougald
December 5, 2016

Thank you, Sue, for the nomination, and to my board colleagues for the support. It is appreciated. Frankly, it is hard to believe that this is my 19th election as chair of this amazing board. Each time—just like this one—has been an honour and a privilege. And I congratulate Vice-chair Suzanne Nurse on her return to this important role.

As we look to the year ahead, the mission of our board—our moral imperative—is the key focus—to inspire success, confidence and hope in each student. I truly believe there is no greater work than this work. No better mission than this one—complete focus on the individual success of each student we serve.

I see that—WE see that—each time we visit schools. We see the depth of caring of our staff in every role, at every site. We understand the commitment to find new ways, better ways, to ensure student success. And we witness how staff constantly modify their work as the world changes more and more rapidly around us. It is awe-inspiring. And as a board, we thank staff for that work.

And that raises an important question. What is the role of this board—as elected representatives—in that work? Different boards define it differently. Some seek to be under the radar, some always on the front page. So, what about Peel?

Our role is clear. It is to actively, personally and passionately support the mission. And, in that work, to reflect the same depth of caring for those we talk to, work with and even argue with in our community—those who elected us—as our schools do each day with students. I have found that the best question I can ask a parent who calls me is “how can I help?” Sometimes in that process we work with staff and find a compromise—sometimes, but not always. But at the end of the day, it is critical that the parent involved knows without question that we cared. Just as our staff do every day with students.

So, what does that look like in the year—or years ahead for this elected board? Well, it’s not all hearts and flowers. What we need—what is expected of us—is more active than passive. If we want each student to achieve personal excellence—as our Plan for Student Success says—then as a board, we need to be caring, courageous leaders about equity and inclusion.

And I use ‘courageous’ deliberately. Our Plan for Student Success says we will “Achieve inclusion for all through continuous progress on equity.” In that statement, equity is the work, inclusion the goal. I would re-define to say as trustees, equity is our work, inclusion is our goal. In fact, in the next decade, it is the most important work an elected board can do—and our community, and history, will judge us on the measure of our continuous progress. And deservedly so.
It is not work that is “safe” or “easy” or where we will always achieve consensus. Yet, as leaders, the clear message is: it’s the RIGHT work. Nineteenth century writer William Shedd observed, “A ship in the harbour is safe—but that is not what ships are for.” Remember, when this was said, in the 1800s, many of the ships left harbour and never returned. Yet, the message—that it is courage that drives us forward to do the right thing—the right work—that’s the message that rings true for each of us.

Just look at our achievements in the last couple of years. The first nation acknowledgement at the start of each school day and board, the work on First Nations, Métis, Inuit images on our school sports teams, the dialogue now happening about imagery on FNMI jerseys worn in schools—all complicated work, all the right work, but by no means do we have total community agreement.

The same is true for our remarkable work that began with the Journey Ahead. We made a public commitment to equitable hiring and promotion in Peel. And we have honoured that commitment. But the seas have not always been calm. It is fair to say we struggled a bit with the reason for a staff census—a key recommendation of the plan. But we listened, and we learned, and just a week ago, we concluded that first census—and I look forward to the responses for staff who “counted themselves in.”

But if you had asked me two years ago if we would be talking about a student census, I am not sure I would have said yes. That would have seemed quite a ways out of the harbour—yet this board unanimously approved that student census—and there is no question it was the right work. Again.

And the same is true of We Rise Together—our action plan for black male youth. I have heard people in the community express concerns about this plan. Why focus on one group. Don’t we support the success of all students? Is this a board or an entire community issue? If the board actually does this work, will the region join in the solution?

Choppy waters indeed. But the right course—without question. As I sat in the remarkable committee meeting where we reviewed the plan and I heard the stories of members of the community, I truly understood why this is where our board needs to be. And it is our role, as elected trustees, to continue to lead those courageous conversations.

And don’t be afraid of dissent—or disagreement. It’s not a sign of a problem—it is an opportunity for progress.

This year, we announced that by the end of the school year, all secondary schools will have an inclusive washroom—a place of safety for those in need. And did we hear concerns? Absolutely. But instead of backing down, we continue to stand by our commitment so all students can feel safe at school. Another “right thing” to do.

Nelson Mandela once said, “A real leader uses every issue, no matter how serious and sensitive, to ensure that at the end of the debate, we should emerge stronger and more united than ever
before.” That’s really our collective role as trustees—to make sure that the issues we deal with, are the ones we learn from, that help us grow as leaders, and become stronger as a courageously caring board.

Of course, that’s easier said than done. Our role is not always a win-win. There are moments when the harbour looks pretty good! We have times where the voices of concern are strong. That’s true when we deal with boundary changes, or French immersion caps, or the PAR/ARC process, or the closure of French and Music rooms. None of these are easy. None have simple solutions—nor ones that are win-win. But our role is clear—to listen, to be respectful to the community and to each other, and to seek the input of those we serve. We need to be accessible, approachable, accountable and transparent in our work. Always. And I am proud of this board for those qualities.

Sometimes these qualities are tested. Look at the Friday Prayer issue. An operating procedure that we were aware of, one that balanced the duty to accommodate with our responsibilities as a public school board—this has caused significant conversation and concern.

Our role now? Well, it’s clear. Winston Churchill said, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak, courage is ALSO what it takes to sit down and listen.” We are all listening, and we deeply value the perspectives we hear. And we, by pausing the process while we listen, are signaling that we have the courage to say we can do better—we must do better—and we will do better—on this issue.

Each of us around this table is still learning, just like each of the students we serve. And sometimes that learning process—though pretty stormy at the time—produces amazing results. Last year, we were dealing with the provincial launch—so to speak—of the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum.

The community voices were strong, provincial support seemed nonexistent, there was little consensus—remember? Yet, together we led the way for the province with a ground-breaking parent guide, endorsed by faith and community leaders, and supported by a strong public information campaign in multiple languages.

There was no safe harbour—our actions were bold and they were the right thing to do—and we transformed that issue for our community. We—around this table. We—in this room. In the CBO. We—in our schools. Together, we were courageously caring and clear. And I was proud to be a part of the solution.

African American Activist Faye Wattleton says the only safe ship in a storm is leadership. I am proud to make that choice with each of you—to be on that “ship” as leaders, together. And I know, with mutual respect, with open minds, with the strength to do what is right, and the dedication to be courageously caring on equity and inclusion, together, we will inspire hope.

Thank you again.