

2015-16 Budget notes for the Chair of the Board

Good evening. As we all know, this is quite the time for public education in Ontario. I know—the understatement of the year. And yet, while this is a precarious time for all stakeholders—students, staff, trustees and families, it remains an exciting time because student learning continues and I’m always amazed by the work of our students, who are supported by their teachers and other staff.

Over the past few weeks, however, I’ve experienced excited uncertainty, and liken the feeling to being on a game show. Not *The Bachelorette* or *Survivor*, more like *Deal or No Deal*—without Howie Mandel and the suitcases of money.

Despite the turbulence we’ve experienced over the past few weeks and the uncertainty that ongoing provincial negotiations may bring, it’s important that we remain optimistic. Though, some days, it’d be easier to use the Phone-A-Friend lifeline.

While we await good news on the negotiations front, there is good news to share about the Peel District School Board’s balanced budget for 2015-16. Here are some key highlights:

- Although secondary enrolment is down, elementary is up with a net enrolment increase of 259 students. And, as most of the funding is linked to enrolment, this has had a net positive effect for our board.

- The board will receive \$17 million more funding for *Grants for Student Needs*. \$11 million is to be used to fund salary increases for teachers moving up the grid based on qualifications and experience.
- The board has been allocated \$50 million in facilities improvements as part of the 2015-16 *School Renewal* grant allocation. Approximately \$32 million is composed of the *School Condition Improvement* grant—this represents a \$20 million increase from last year. This \$32 million will be used to improve key building components and systems, such as exterior walls, roofs, windows, plumbing and electrical work. The remaining \$18 million is the board’s regular renewal allocation, and will be used for a number of renewal projects, including facility improvements to instructional space, accessibility, outdoor playing fields, gym flooring, curb appeal, PA systems, camera equipment and other school based renewal projects.
- Special Education funding has increased as a direct result of our *Fix the Formula* campaign, thanks to the efforts of staff, parents, partners and community members. As a direct result of the campaign’s success, we’ll receive close to an additional \$5.6 million in 2015-16, with the majority being within the High Needs Amount. This will bring Special Education funding closer to actual spending, but we will still spend more than our allocated funding to support students because there are clear and defined special education needs.

For the second consecutive year, we will be significantly increasing the number of teaching assistants in our schools. Next year, we will add 70 teaching assistants to support students' complex physical, development, emotional and behavioural needs.

Although our *Fix the Formula* campaign was hugely successful with respect to special education funding, our work isn't done when it comes to fairness and funding. We must begin to talk publicly and openly about the need for English as a Second Language funding for students who are born in Canada. These students have the same language learning needs as those who arrive from outside of Canada and must be offered the same access to service and the same level of funding. Yet we receive far less for ESL funding for these students and that's not fair.

- Another key ask of our families is transportation. Last year, we voted to lower grade 1 and secondary busing distances. Next year, subject to budget, we will look to approve a reduction in transportation eligibility distances for grade 7 and 8 students that would take effect September 2016. Enhancements in the provision of transportation continue to be a goal of this board. It was also one of the recommendations in last year's StAR report and we've seen an impact on curb appeal, facilities and athletics as we continue to deliver the Peel board advantage.

I'd like to thank the team in Finance, especially Associate Director Jaspal Gill and Controller Tania Alatishe-Charles for their hard work and leadership in preparing this balanced budget focused on supporting student success and well-being. I would also like to thank Director Tony Pontes, Associate Director Scott Moreash and our senior executive team who I know work for months gathering input from the system to ensure our funding priorities are aligned with our system goals.

This work is especially challenging when there are financial implications you have no control over—it's like being a contestant on *Press Your Luck*, but there's no button to press...only whammies. Here are our two whammies:

- First, the ministry has removed the top-up allocation, which was used for expenditures on schools that are not at full capacity. They are, however, allowing for a two per cent increase on non-staff school operating costs and a seven per cent increase for electricity rates.
- Second, funding for administration and governance was changed in 2014-15. The change is being phased in over four years, and has resulted in a \$750,000 decrease for Peel for the 2015-16 school year. This phasing in will continue for another two years, with a total loss of \$3 million over the four-year phase-in period ending 2017-18.

Now, unlike some of our colleagues in the province, we're not eliminating jobs or important programs. The ministry *Wheel of Fortune* spells out financial stability for

the Peel board. Although there's still room for improvement in their funding model, we continue to be committed to working within the grants we're provided to meet the learning needs of all Peel students.

But, what the future will bring remains to be seen. There is this uncertainty I spoke about earlier when it comes to the provincial labour situation. As you know, all of our employee group contracts have expired and the provincial bargaining structure poses significant challenges when it comes to local negotiations. Our goal, as always, is to reach fair, negotiated and student-centered agreements with our employee groups, but they must fall within the funding provided by the province.

So, are we excited or are we living on the edge? I'd say a bit of both. We look tonight at a budget that has significant enhancements for our schools and students. That is positive and inspires hope. Yet, we don't know what lies ahead, financially or politically, for public education, and education in Peel. And that is anxiety-inducing, for us, our staff, our students and their families.

But given all of this, we remain focused on the projects in our *Report Card for Student Success*, and guided by our mission statement—to inspire success, confidence and hope in each student. Every decision this board makes, each item we add to the budget and each that is taken away, all reflect that mission and what is in the best interests of students. This is a responsibility we take very

seriously, and I'm very proud of our steadfast commitment in this regard. *Jeopardy* host Alex Trebek once said, "My job is to provide the atmosphere and assistance to the contestants to get them to perform at their very best." In our own way, trustees play a similar role. On behalf of Peel families, we make decisions each and every day that impact the life trajectories of our students. And positively so.

But I'm not naïve. I know that our decisions would be all for naught if not for the tremendous contributions of Peel staff and volunteers. Every day, we rely on their dedication and goodwill to inspire success, confidence and hope in each student and for that we are grateful.

Thank you all for your commitment to this mission.