

## **Janet McDougald, Chair of the Board**

### **Budget Meeting – June 15, 2012**

Good evening. The budget before us tonight—all appearances to the contrary—is not a book, or even a binder. It is really a means to an end—the way we achieve our mission to inspire success, confidence and hope in each student. And behind the budget before us tonight—behind this critical means to our collective end—is countless hours of work, and endless difficult decisions.

So, on behalf of the board, I would like to thank the team in Finance, especially Associate Director Carla Kisko and Controller Christine Beal, for their hard work and leadership in preparing this budget. I would also like to thank Director Tony Pontes, Associate Director Pam Tomasevic and our senior team of superintendents and controllers who I know worked for months—gathering input from the system to ensure our funding priorities are linked with our system goals in the Report Card

for Student Success. They have truly done the very best with the reduced funding from the province.

And that funding is the issue. Of course, we all know the financial situation in this province, the country, the world. Equally, we know we need to do our part. In fact, long before we received the budget, we had asked each department to reduce discretionary budgets by three per cent across the board. Through the administrative budget process there have been other savings found by reducing office staff support in secondary schools, for example.

But right now most people have the sense that the government's plan—and it is **their** plan—to freeze salaries, grids and change sick days—is the economic price to pay for maintaining education funding. There is good reason for people to believe that—it has been very well messaged from the province. And messaged often.

In fact, it was a commitment front and centre in the budget news release with a lofty promise and I quote the, “government will continue to build on its plan to have the world's best-educated workforce to ensure future prosperity in the knowledge-based economy.” Wow. Impressive. But somehow, lost in the translation, is the financial commitment to actually attain that goal. Because, when all the numbers are crunched, all the beans counted, all the information run through the government’s budget software, the end result is not positive for the Peel District School Board, for our staff, for our students or for our community. In fact, it is fair to say this has been the most difficult budget for this board since this “education government” was elected.

Now, I want to be clear, this is not about support or lack of support for this government or our local MPPs—we recognize and acknowledge the progress made, the funding provided, the peace and stability in schools, the innovative and powerful programs introduced in the last eight years. But all this does not justify unconditional support when we have to cut literacy teachers, for example.

And we have had to make those cuts—the government made a specific reduction in the amount of funding for Curriculum and Teaching Specialists—the very people who help us to achieve the government’s goals in literacy and numeracy. And, once again, our reduction of \$2.5 million was higher than we deserved. Frankly, that is simply unfair.

As is the arbitrary cut to our maintenance budget of about \$2.4 million this year, and four times more than that next year for a total reduction of \$9.6 million. Once again, as a board, we feel punished for having been efficient and effective in building new schools while closing under-enrolled older schools. After all, that was the government direction. Now, the boards with those older, under-enrolled schools will actually get more maintenance funding this year.

This is simply not fair. Not fair to our students and communities who make such excellent use of our schools. And not fair to our extraordinary custodial and maintenance team who do an extraordinary job of keeping schools spotless. The extra year to phase in was helpful, but I would

respectfully remind the government that when we received the increased LOG funding that our students deserved, they phased it in over four years. I would ask the government to phase this reduction in over the same number of years—and to reduce the amount to something fairer for the students, staff and taxpayers of Peel. This will be a key issue we will raise with our MPPs so their voices can be heard.

As well, the funding formula has got to be addressed. Our per pupil funding gap continues to be inequitable relative to neighbouring boards. We have worked as a system—trustees, school councils, administration, parents and community—to pressure this government to review the funding formula as they promised. To fund the actual students we teach—to do the equitable thing and treat us fairly compared to our neighbouring GTA boards—to no avail.

I am also, frankly, concerned about the kind of language and messaging I now hear from the province. In their May 29 news release about “protecting gains in education,” the quote was, “With enrolment down

significantly since 2003 and projected to continue to decline in the coming years, Ontario needs to focus limited taxpayer dollars on the classroom rather than administration and back-office expenses.” I haven’t heard that kind of talk since the Mike Harris government.

So, here is a bit of a tip to the message-crafters—in Peel our enrolment may not have grown as much this year, but it has certainly not declined since 2003. Quite the opposite. And second, in my experience, I have never met a hard-working, committed, student-focused staff member who deserved to be referred to as a “back office expense”. Don’t get me wrong—we care about efficiency and effectiveness—it is one of our eight goals, and our excellent work in that area has been highlighted by the province’s own review.

Every staff member, no matter what department, is working to support schools and—support our mission, to help students be confident, successful and hopeful.

And, on the enrolment issue, the government may want to take a look at the data they collect. It is not actually about the number of students—it is about the needs of those students. As a board, we see those needs first hand in the request for teaching assistants to help individual students with complex needs. Frankly, since 2003, those needs are more complex. More students with significant behaviour issues, mental health issues, students who are medically fragile, students with specific identifications like Autism Spectrum Disorder. Our schools, our staff, serve these students incredibly well, despite the fact—and it is a fact—that we remain the lowest funded board on a per pupil basis for high needs students. That must be fixed—no matter what.

Again, I reiterate – this is an outstanding budget report, given the funds available. With the commitment from all our hard working staff we will continue to focus on the success of every student, but if the government would have the courage to address our growth by reviewing and redistributing funding, we could do so much more. To this end, we will continue to advocate for all our students and staff in Peel.

