

## **2017-18 Budget notes**

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

Let me begin by thanking our amazing leaders in this budget process—Jaspal and Tania—you and your finance colleagues have done an incredible job in preparing and presenting the budget for our review. I know that your team starts literally the day after approval on the next budget year—so get busy on 2018/2019!

Truly, the budget before us tonight represents months of hard work. Led by the director, associates and finance staff, there has been a massive process review, analysis and decision-making to get to this point. And we, as trustees, appreciate that work.

Much of the effort is focused on that age-old economics concept of supply and demand. The only problem is, we can't control the supply—the amount that flows to us from the province. While the demand—which grows each year—is ours to manage.

We accept that responsibility. The review and approval of the budget is the most important duty of the role of trustee—with the possible exception of hiring a director—and we've been there, done that!

So, we don't control what comes to us—just our response. In some ways, the budget is like the weather—we can't decide if it will rain or snow or hail – in Canada that can all happen on the same day—just what we will do with that day! We take that decision-making process seriously. How we spend the limited funds in the best way possible for students—in budget years that are sunny, and those not so much.

In that work, we are guided first and foremost by our commitment to want what is best for students. That guides every decision we make as a board. To help with that work, we have our own 'weather network' of sorts—our Plan for Student Success. Approved by this board last year, the plan defines our four priority areas and our key projects. It tells us where to spend our time and resources—and equally important—where NOT to invest.

Those four areas-

High expectations for achievement  
Parent, community and staff engagement  
Equity and inclusion  
and  
Safe, positive, healthy climate/well-being

have truly guided our work—and our budget reflects those priority areas.

To help with that process, we have benefitted from the wise counsel of our leadership team, our principals and vice-principals, all of our unions and federations and, through an online survey, nearly 400 staff, parents and community. This seeking of advice on budget is an area we need to nurture and enhance moving forward. We need staff and the community—and especially school councils—to have a clear understanding of the budget reality, the process and the challenges. They need to be partners—not observers.

So, the weather forecast for this budget is fairly sunny. With some cloudy periods. This year, we had \$7.5 million to invest in new initiatives—a rare opportunity for any Ontario school board. To extend the impact, we are also using \$3.7 million from reserves. And our decisions reflect the Plan for Student Success—and our consultation. They include:

- 70 additional TA positions; conversion of 73 LTO positions and 31 new LTO TA roles
- New PSSP positions—including a social worker to support our students from Syria and beyond
- New roles to do the hard work in equity and inclusion
- \$750,000 to enhance extracurricular activities

And more.

Like what? Well, as a board we have made the choice to absorb millions of dollars lost in top-up funding in facilities. As well, the board is spending \$1 million to keep elementary French and Music classrooms open. That is an issue where we heard from the community—we listened. And we also will spend \$5 million on capital improvements.

So - like I said - it's easy to approve this budget. But there are some clouds on the horizon - dark ones and we, as a board, and as a system, need to prepare for that—for our response—for what we control. To recreate ourselves to respond to the change.

For example, while it is laudable to increase the number of TA roles, there is a need to look at our use of TAs as we move forward. We know the need; we see the need; we understand the incredible job our staff do each day with some of our most vulnerable students. There is no question.

But—our expenditure on TA allocation is growing faster than we can afford. That is not a criticism—it is a reality. Our work together on Fix the Formula has helped—but we continue to outspend our special education allocation. There is a special education review in the Plan for Student Success. We need to make it our focus in the year to come. We need to work harder to help the province understand it is not just about the number of students—not a volume issue—but the complexity of needs.

We have students with extraordinarily high needs. We have students with severe behavioral issues they often cannot control. Students who need an intense level of support. And, to be clear, we are glad to have those students in our public schools. They are welcome and included here.

The province needs to fund these students—to help them reach success. And fund the students in a way that truly acknowledges their complexity of needs. I will ask our friends in SEAC, on school councils, our unions and federations, and OPSBA to join us in building that understanding.

Einstein said “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that created them”. Our problem—and to be clear it is a financial problem—NOT the needs of our students—can’t continue to be solved with the old solutions—add TAs. That is not financially sustainable. I know that statement won’t be popular, might upset some, but like an accurate weather forecast it is unfortunately true.

The numbers tell the story. I said we have \$7.5 million in funding to support the key priorities in our Plan for Student Success—our new spending on TAs in this budget totals \$9.36 million. Our total TA spending last year was \$96.5 million. And the need is real. We know that.

But we also know that there is a need to change our thinking---to respond differently to the need. We saw the results of our major study on TA use this year—and we look forward to an action plan next year. The study will make us think in new ways about how we use our TAs, how we best meet the needs of our vulnerable students, and will mean some change that will be tough-but needed.

I don’t want to be the rain here in this sunny, good news budget. I do feel a bit like those cartoon characters who walk around with a rain cloud over their head. But these are important discussions to have—especially with a provincial election—and financial uncertainty—in the forecast.

As a board, we look forward to this conversation. To working with stakeholders. To do what we do best—find solutions that best meet the needs of our students. To have courage to look in new ways – no matter what the weather.

Actor Alan Alda once said, “Be brave enough to live life creatively. The creative place where no one else has ever been.” I want us, as trustees, as a system, to be as brave, and creative, in solving our financial challenges as our staff are each day in the classroom as they support students. That is what our system deserves. What our students deserve.

Thank you.