

Good evening. As we sit here tonight it is at a time in Ontario education that is both exciting and perilous. Exciting because the key financial issue we identified one year ago has been resolved—favourably—and so we can do more for students. And perilous because we face an incredibly uncertain financial future no matter what the outcome of the election this week.

So, are we optimistic or pessimistic, glass half empty or half full? I guess the answer is yes. On all counts. We look tonight at a budget that has significant enhancements for our schools and students. That is positive and creates hope. Yet, we don't know what lies ahead, financially or politically, for public education, and education in Peel. And that creates concern.

So let's start with a little good news. Despite the tremendous change in our own financial team, we have had a smooth and tremendously collaborative budget process. I want to thank Director Tony Pontes, Associate Director Jaspal Gill and Associate Director Scott Moreash for their hard work, guidance and cooperative spirit. It would be hard to find in this province a budget that better reflects the values of teamwork and

responsibility.

We again came to the table, 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. And make no mistake—each decision we make, each item added to the budget, each taken away, all reflect that mission and what is best for students. These are not just words—they are how we do our work together.

What does that look like? Well, let's rewind to last year. At that point I said — “The province must fund the high needs special education students we have in our schools now—today—not the ones that were there years ago. Using current, correct data would go a long way to solving the fair funding gap.”

That was a major challenge to the province—after all we had been asking for a review for years and the ministry had resisted. But we were committed to equity and launched a major and successful campaign - #FixtheFormula. With community meetings and speaking notes and school council nights and even a video, we were relentless in delivering the #FixtheFormula message.

Even though some of our school board colleagues did not like our point about distribution, we—each of us around this table—worked tirelessly, together, to deliver the message about fair funding to our community. And they listened, and they acted. And we were heard. And—surprise—it worked.

We now expect as we asked, a phased-in implementation of a new formula for the High Needs amount that means millions in new funds for our students. And I want to thank all of our staff, especially our magnificent communications department, our community partners, our school councils, our parents and our municipality friends who raised their voices on this issue. Our sincerest thanks for all your help.

And, I want to thank our MPP partners too—all of them from the three major parties—who met with us, listened to us, and brought the issue of Peel underfunding to Queen's park. It was a perfect example of working together for the benefit of Peel students.

Through that process we, as a board, also made commitments. We talked about how we had to take the \$14 million in underfunding for special education from other areas of the budget, and so each and every student was affected. We said if we had enough money

to solve our special education FUNDING issue—not spending issue—we could reallocate our money to things parents have asked for like more money for schools, busing and additional research-based special education supports.

So, how did we do? Did our values guide our decisions? Yes. For sure. We have already voted to lower elementary and secondary busing distances—a longtime goal of this board and a longtime ask of our families. With StAR-Student Attract and Retain—we are seeing in the budget \$850,000 dollars sent directly to schools to support school and extracurricular activities. And, yes, we have also significantly increased the number of teaching assistants in our schools, based on the clear and identified need.

And we have gone beyond that. We are allocating \$1.3 million to improve school curb-appeal and adding a central role to boost high school sports. We are adding and supporting more regional programs and at the same time re-focusing on the strength and benefits of choosing the excellent local school through the Peel Board Advantage fairs.

We continue, as well, with major initiatives like the Journey Ahead and BYOD.

And, while a bit of a political football right now, I want to reinforce our commitment to what was full day kindergarten—and this fall will just be kindergarten—for all of our children in Peel. The implementation has been challenging, but I applaud those on the ground who have made it work. People in our facilities department for example who get the renovations and construction done. The incredible classroom partners—the ECE and kindergarten teachers who do amazing work together—and our important and vital partners in the child care sector. We have said at each point that this is potentially the most powerful new innovation in public education in decades—and we still believe that to be absolutely true.

So, tonight we have a “good news” budget. A rarity. Yet we are not able to fully enjoy it—because we just don’t know what comes next. Whoever is elected faces a deficit, and that means a rocky road ahead. There already appears to be some rumoured clouds on the labour horizon—and that is not good.

So, where does that leave us—and our students? I think it leaves us with a critical decision to make—and it starts with voting. And voting with OUR values—the values of public education in mind.

We all have a stake in a well funded, quality public education system. It is the economic engine of this country. I ask you to become informed about what each party is proposing, think about the future of our children and their need to compete locally and globally.

And, just as we fashioned our budget based on our mission – thinking first of students – I would ask you to do the same in your voting. As for us—for our board—I can make a commitment to you—no matter who is elected—no matter which party—or parties—govern this province—as a board we will always see our role as first and foremost the defenders of public education in Peel. We will make the tough decisions, embark on the necessary battles, and be guided by our values and beliefs in the power of public education to inspire success, confidence and hope.

Thank you all for your commitment to this mission.