

Starting Point Speech

Director of Education Peter Joshua

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Good morning! How fortunate are we to be surrounded by colleagues who are ready to inspire success, confidence and hope? I hope you were able to recharge and spend time with those you love this summer. Welcome back!

I'd like to thank everyone who worked diligently over the summer to ensure we are back-to-school-ready. To the Maintenance Services team, project managers and support staff who oversaw construction for the renewal, renovations and improvements at schools, thank you. To our Facilities team, including facilities managers and custodial staff, thanks for your tireless efforts to improve curb appeal and make Peel schools shine. To our Welcome Centre staff, thank you for providing new students and families with a warm welcome. And to others who ran summer programs or worked throughout the summer to ensure we are back-to-school ready—including those in Transportation—please know you are appreciated.

I'm also thankful to lead alongside trustees, associate directors Jaspal Gill, Poleen Grewal and Mark Haarmann—who is one month into his new role—and other members of Peel's leadership team. Each is steadfast in their commitment to student success and well-being, and it is my privilege to serve with them.

Heading into my third year as Director of Education, I recognize the opportunity I have to lead with optimism. I hope we share this outlook, especially as we begin what may be a complicated year in public education. In order to remain positive, we must look after and be supported in our own wellness.

While we acknowledge the need to nurture well-being of students, we must also do the same for staff by continuing to cultivate a culture of care. As you continue to support mentally healthy schools for students know that this work is deeply connected to maintaining a workplace that also prioritizes staff well-being.

We must focus on self-care, as well as our care for others. When we invest in ourselves, it is not selfish; it is necessary. We must keep our buckets full, for, as author Eleanor Brown reminds us, "We cannot serve from an empty vessel." What is good for students is good for staff. We must all *be well to do well*.

When we thrive, Peel students strive.

[VIDEO: *When you thrive, I strive*]

Thank you to students from Lorne Park Secondary School and their teacher Ben Grant for reminding us how important it is for us to be well in Peel.

I hope you had an opportunity this morning to visit with staff and external agencies who are ready to support our wellness. They showed us how to build healthy climates for learning and working, and shared wellness reading lists, fresh-air thinking strategies and mindfulness activities. Later, our keynote speaker Diana Patton will help us adopt a daily practice of self-care and self-awareness.

In addition, the board's Wellness Committee will continue to work with us on wellness strategies for staff and mental health resourcing. With the support of Homewood Health and other partners, we will ensure staff have access to supports they need to be fully engaged and well.

This is one of the reasons we are hiring a new staff well-being coordinator who will work with the Wellness Committee and with clinical staff, including our student well-being coordinator who has helped us with support for student needs.

I hope today's focus on wellness, and these new roles, demonstrate our investment and renewed commitment to staff well-being. We aren't simply jumping onto the employee wellness bandwagon. We will work *with* you to learn what you value on your journey towards better health—not only because it's one of our *Plan for Student Success* goals, but because building safe, positive and healthy climates for learning and working to nurture well-being is the right thing to do.

Looking forward to 2019-20, we remain committed to our board's five-year strategic plan, our *Plan for Student Success*. Its purpose is to identify system goals that are broad, inspiring, ambitious and reflective of key priorities, with student success at the centre.

We are three years into the implementation of our plan and we're looking to measure the impacts. How are we monitoring our learning journey?

One way we do this is through *School Success Planning*. This tool is being revamped to ensure individuals and teams are not working in silos, but are connecting big initiatives to better support student success. The new SSP website was developed with input from central department staff, superintendents of education, administrator representatives and union/federation partners. The committee met to review, design and develop a site that aligns with the *Plan for Student Success*, while allowing schools a clear process to customize site-specific plans. It was also intentionally designed for superintendents of education and principals to monitor schools' progress towards

achieving board goals. The former mid-fall reporting timeline will be moved to a series of regular check-ins by superintendents, with each item having an independent timeline.

As part of this work, we will refresh school and board Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plans. Climate teams will support this work and plans will be entered into SSP. The hope is to consolidate this work into one tool that administrators and superintendents can use to monitor progress. And please understand, this is not George Orwell's *1984*—Big Brother is not watching with ill intention. We will check in to look for opportunities to offer support to help school communities strengthen student success and well-being. This is the value of measuring impact.

Using SSP, you will be able to reflect on current practice and set direction for your collaborative learning as it relates to our board priorities: Equity, *Empowering Modern Learners* and *EngageMath*. Let's spend a bit of time on each.

As a system, our continued commitment to inspiring success, confidence and hope in each student means that we must continue to hold student voice and identity at the core of everything we do. As Poet Adrienne Rich reminds us, "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing."

We were fortunate to have had Dr. Christopher Emdin, who is an associate professor in the Department of Mathematics, Science, and Technology at Columbia University's Teachers' College, keynote this year's E3 Conference. In his book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all Too*, Dr. Emdin writes:

"Within the urban classroom, valuing voice means providing students with an opportunity to have their thoughts, words, and ideas about the classroom and the world beyond it heard and incorporated into the approach to instruction. By accepting that student voice will be a major part of the structure of the classroom, the teacher must be prepared for a number of possible scenarios that may initially be uncomfortable for the teacher, will challenge both the structure of the traditional classroom and the teacher's authority, but will ultimately positively affect the teacher's instruction and the students' learning."

Peel's vision for *Empowering Modern Learners* acknowledges this challenge not only for classroom teachers, but for our entire system. His book encourages personal reflection, ongoing conversations and shifts in practice that inspire us to meet the needs and honour the experiences of modern learners. This equitable approach remains our core commitment.

As a system, we will continue to ensure there is alignment with the key concepts and skills outlined in *Focusing on the Fundamentals of Math* through our *EngageMath* Plan - Year 6. Professional learning sessions will continue to be focused on deepening mathematical content

knowledge for teaching while intentionally infusing the principles of *Empowering Modern Learners* and *Equity*. Our commitment to refocusing on two of the six components of *Balanced Math Instruction, K-12: Basic Facts and Operational Skills* and *Purposeful Practice* will continue to be central to Peel's *EngageMath* Plan.

Just last week, we had another successful *Empowering Modern Learners* summer conference where we continued to further the EML vision for our board and the belief that each learner is curious, competent, and able to take an active role in their own learning. Last year, we created the role of the EML Teacher Leader in each school and these educators will continue to complement the great work of our Modern Learning Resource Teachers in schools. In addition, this year, we launch D2L's Brightspace as our board-supported digital assessment tool and virtual learning environment to help teachers continue to engage in modern assessment and evaluation strategies with their learners.

An ever-changing world requires us as learners and educators to be willing to innovate our practice in response to the needs of modern learners. This journey requires a collective commitment to invest in all students. As Pablo Picasso once said, "There is only one way to look at things, until someone shows us how to look at things with different eyes."

The diversity of the Peel board provides us with a unique opportunity to see schools, communities and the world with different eyes. There was a time when students with disabilities would simply be excluded from public education. Now, as we welcome all students into our schools, we can identify barriers to learning we didn't see before because students with disabilities and special education needs bring a different way of knowing.

We see that not all of our buildings are accessible...yet. We see that some students need equipment to hear or see their lessons. We know that some students need support to engage with their peers. We know that some students need help to be more organized and arrive prepared.

In looking at the system through an asset lens and through the eyes of students with special education needs, we begin to understand these struggles better. Today, we know that students with special education needs provide all of us with opportunities—opportunities to innovate, create and restructure a system that was not initially designed for their inclusion. Through Universal Design For Learning principles, their peers and educators will learn to adapt traditional environments and practices to create better, more inclusive ones.

Creative educators will co-construct solutions with their students that support the needs of all learners, while providing unique and real-life learning opportunities. Consider an educator whose class problem-solves together to create space for equipment belonging to a student with

physical needs. They learn to prioritize room set-up and explore inclusive design as they co-construct their classroom layout with a human rights mindset.

Experiences like this problem-based learning opportunity help all students develop a more inclusive perspective that supports future leaders as they create communities for the next generation that will be designed for all because they know that human diversity includes all people with all abilities.

Diversity can bring challenges as we all see things differently. But collectively, diversities in perspective build a stronger, more versatile, accessible, equitable and inclusive society.

Equity mustn't be seen as a trend in education; it must be seen as transformative and necessary. And, as Dr. Pedro Noguera says, "We'll know we are doing equity work right when kids' backgrounds no longer predict their outcomes."

As responsive educators, it is our moral imperative to support all students, including marginalized students. One of the ways we are doing this is through our *Focus on Poverty Action Plan*. Last year, a number of Peel staff representing a wide range of roles and departments, worked on an extensive, long-term plan to support students and families living in poverty. It is organized into five action areas:

- awareness and understanding of the impact of poverty
- supports for families living in poverty
- equitable allocation of human and material resources
- equitable participation in programs
- student success and well-being

While staff continue to do this work, I'm excited to share that this Fall, we will begin to implement the plan. We will provide administrators with the data and tools they need to evaluate and address barriers at the school-level.

From a system perspective, we are reviewing access to Regional Learning Choices Programs, specifically looking at potential barriers, including fees and transportation. We will also work on an online resource where students and families, and staff who support them, will be able to access a complete inventory of community resources.

One of those resources is our recently launched Peel Learning Foundation. To date, the foundation has supported 101 Peel students with emergency funds and prepared 120 backpacks to distribute to students. We also continue to work with community agencies to provide supports for families living in poverty, including our ongoing partnership with United Way of Greater Toronto.

Our commitment to equity and culturally responsive practices will continue to support all learners. At every opportunity, we must find creative ways to ensure that no student is disadvantaged due to a lack of financial resources or marginalization.

We will continue to use our *Plan for Student Success* to place marginalized students at the centre of our mission in order to systemically create the conditions necessary for them to succeed. As a system, we continue to focus on our Indigenous and *We Rise Together* action plans. To support this and our commitment to equity and inclusion, in March, Trustees approved a motion to implement a focused initiative to recruit Indigenous and Black educators.

Research tells us that students are more successful when they see staff who represent their identities. For Black and Indigenous students, this is even more critical given their experiences of marginalization due to systemic racism that is grounded in colonialism, slavery, poverty, and other historical and current impacts.

While we are in the early stages of development of the focused recruitment initiative, we have consulted and surveyed over 300 people, including Peel's PINE and PAACE employee resource groups, who have provided invaluable insight and knowledge that will inform our work. We're excited to embark on this ground-breaking work that will lead to transformational change for Peel students and our system.

In public education, we have the opportunity to create environments that foster inclusion, celebrate diversities and nurture understanding. I am thankful for the opportunity to instill these shared values in students as we help create a more inclusive future for our entire community.

I'd like to highlight a few other initiatives we are working on:

- an educator portal, in partnership with the National Council of Canadian Muslims to address the unacceptable rise in Islamophobia
- resources to support the success and well-being of students who identify as 2SLGBTQ+
- a new initiative to end the use of the N-word and other racist phrases, homophobic and Islamophobic comments, ability-related slurs, and other discriminatory remarks. This commitment to stop bias, bullying, hate and discrimination will be connected to *Choose Action Week* in November, complements *We Rise Together* and aligns with our broader anti-racism work
- recognition and celebration of Indigenous History Month and Islamic, Hindu, Sikh and Jewish heritage months begins this school year. Trustees approved this motion that includes meaningful learning for students. Supports will be prepared by our Curriculum and Communications departments, in collaboration with community faith leaders.

When students learn about identities based on race, gender, religion or creed, sexuality, ability or ethnicity through narrative, celebration or inquiry, it is a reflection of student voice and an invitation to learning that helps achieve inclusion of all through continuous progress on equity.

As I said at my first *Starting Point* speech, inclusion isn't simply about proximity—ensuring everyone is in the room; it's about intentionality—intentionally planning for representation and for the success of every student. As you know, last November, we completed our first, board-wide *Student Census* to better understand and meet the needs of the communities we serve.

Our Research and Accountability department has been diligently analyzing, line by line, just over 126,000 returned questionnaires, to identify and summarize trends. This upcoming school year, they will produce school and board reports to help us establish effective programs, and lead to the possible reallocation of resources to ensure the needs of all students are addressed effectively and equitably. It will also help us identify and eliminate barriers to student success, inclusion and well-being.

And we continue to focus on mentally healthy schools in the area of well-being. Through our Mental Health and Addictions Strategy, our focus is to:

- promote positive mental health
- build student social-emotional learning skills
- reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking skills
- identify students in need
- offer preventive services for students at higher risk
- build collaborative partnerships and pathways to, from, and through community services

To assist you in accessing supports, on our intranet, you will find strategies to lead mentally healthy schools. Our goal of building safe, positive and healthy climates for learning and working is achievable because of the work you do each day to help create resilient, inclusive school communities focused on well-being. Thank you.

Before I introduce this morning's keynote, we're in for a showcase of inclusion. Inspired by their peer Sarah Walker's poem on living with autism entitled "Hi, My Name is Normal," Chinguacousy Secondary School students teamed up to create *The Neurodiversity Project* to help shed light on what high school is like when you identify as *neurodivergent*. The term stems from a movement that brain differences, such as autism and depression, should be respected as any other human diversity.

Students researched and brainstormed for months to create the original drama production, which is entirely written and performed by Chinguacousy students. Many of those involved

identify as neurodivergent, and some students use accommodations throughout the play. Without further ado, it is my honour to welcome them to the stage.

[The Neurodiversity Project student performance]

Profound and inspiring. Thank you to everyone involved in *The Neurodiversity Project*. Thank you for allowing us to see you, not for your diagnosis, but for who you really are.

In her reflection, student poet Sarah Walker said her favourite experience on this project was sharing diverse voices and knowing that these students are portraying who they needed to see five, 10 years ago—individuals who inspire hope and tell them they're not broken.

Breathe that in.

Each of us has our own unique beauty and purpose, and we must, as Steve Maraboli says, live accordingly. But to do that, we must embrace all that we are—our unique gifts, our deep *why*, and we must freely share it, in service, with the world around us. This morning, we're fortunate to have Diana Patton with us to help us understand and manage this because, when we do, we make a profound difference in students' lives. Diana is an attorney, social justice and integrative advocacy coach, and author. Join me in giving her a warm Canadian welcome.

[Diana Patton speaks]

Thank you, Diana, for helping us understand the lasting, positive impact each of us can have on the lives of students and each other when we are well.

Knowing that, for some, wellness means feeling supported operationally, there are two other items that I'd like to bring to your attention before we close:

- One is the launch of Finance's Effective Practices site this September. The previous hard copy version has been replaced. The online version is more comprehensive, will be easier to maintain and will be an excellent resource on financial processes. Thank you to the Finance team and those who offered input to create this valuable resource.
- The second is the soon-to-be-released, updated Peel Partnership Handbook. The handbook is a guide to support collaborative and positive working relationships among school staff and school-based early years and child care service providers. Please review the handbook to ensure that shared space is available on an ongoing basis to provide consistent, seamless learning and care environments for students.

As we head into next school year, I encourage you to find peace in challenging moments, to seek support as you need it and to live every moment. Take a second to marvel and be grateful for the opportunities we have, each day, to positively impact a child's life trajectory.

After today, your school or department will receive gratitude cards, created by students from Hillside Public School and Heart Lake Secondary School led by teachers Debbie Axiak and Susanne Rodgers. Give these to individuals whose *heart work* inspires.

It continues to be my absolute privilege to serve this community, to find joy in the little and big accomplishments of staff and students, and to celebrate these with you. Our heart work is life-changing work and your contributions are valued and appreciated.

Have a wonderful school year and remember to access the supports you need to thrive so Peel students can continue to strive.