

Janet McDougald Budget Notes 2013

Good evening. As we sit tonight as a board to deliberate on the budget, I have to think that it is a bit like going to the movie theatre to see the latest summer blockbuster—but without the snacks!

You see the product—the movie—but not the process. And for us, this year in particular, the process matters—it is important. Because the budget deliberations did not start tonight—or even two weeks ago when we had our preliminary budget presentation to board. The process began months ago, and I think that it is a “behind the scenes” story worth telling.

As a board, we were very pleased to see a budget development committee created—one that involved trustees and administration in a joint effort to come to grips with what we thought might be a hard budget year. But, like with many movie plot lines, it developed into one of the most difficult budgets in our history.

As a group, we had the chance to better understand the budget in depth; to balance the system needs—as presented in our updated Report Card for Student Success—with the cold, hard fiscal facts.

Those facts are troubling. We lost nearly ten million dollars in provincial funding. That is shocking. But with no other sources of revenue, we have to accept this further underfunding and once again work with it.

So, I want to acknowledge the incredibly hard work, and collaborative spirit, of Director Tony Pontes, Associate Director Scott Moreash and of course, Associate Director Carla Kisko, and her amazing team led by Controller Christine Beal. Yes, the budget was difficult; yes - difficult decisions were made; but at the end of the day, as the credits roll, it is **OUR** shared budget—and that matters.

Why? Well, as they sing in High School Musical—we're all in this together. But that is a lot easier when budgets are better. When we are adding programs, and people. Not so

easy when the opposite is true—and quite honestly that is the real test of an organization's beliefs, and commitments.

There is a great quote from—of all people—singer Joan Jett—she says, “for me the challenge isn't to be different but to be consistent.” In fact, that is our challenge as well—as a board, and as a school system—to stay consistent, to not be different because funding is different. To stay focused with intentional precision on our mission, and our goals, and on our students.

Of course, we have to honour the bottom line. But that doesn't mean as a system we don't continue to do great things. Quite the opposite.

So what happens when there are more demands and less money? Well, we could yearn for the world of the aforementioned summer blockbuster. Maybe be like Superman and jump over provincial deficits in a single bound. Or hope to be like the characters in the new movie “Now You See Me”. After all, they are magicians who can seemingly make millions of dollars appear out of mid-air. That would be

handy at budget time. Or even at household budget time!

But sadly, not the case. Instead of hoping for a magical solution—like a provincial move to fairer funding that doesn't put Peel in the back of the pack—we had to find our own solutions, and make some tough choices.

And we did just that. Significant cuts to central departments - returning 46 teachers from central roles back to the classroom, reducing school operations, and on and on. But as we did so, we kept our focus on our goals, and priorities.

So we will maintain our support for the Vision for 21st Century Teaching and Learning—and will in fact enhance our work to make parents as partners in that initiative.

And we are significantly increasing our funding and staffing to support the Journey Ahead: Our Action Plan for Equitable Hiring and Promotion. If we believe in bias-free hiring, and we do, we have to make sure we do everything possible to transform our hiring practices—even if the funds are limited.

However, make no mistake, this is not a Ron Howard, happy ending kind of movie. Not this budget. And the work doesn't end here. We still don't know, for example, what impact the provincial labour discussions will have on boards—but the evidence so far is...not good. We also have seen for the first time in 17 years, a decline in enrollment—and as an organization we now need to look at what we need to do to turn that around. And that may mean significant changes in our work—everything from more family-friendly flexible boundary policies to reviewing the use of uniforms.

And, we have to continue to work with the ministry on our per pupil funding gap—specifically in special education. We are the absolute lowest funded board in the entire province on the high needs amount of special education. In case you didn't get that, let me repeat –Lowest. In. The. Province. Funded almost 50% less than our neighbour board.

That is not acceptable. It was not acceptable when we first realized it several years ago. It was not acceptable when the province promised year after year to review what they

also see as a flawed formula. And it is certainly not acceptable this year when they have again quietly announced that they will not review the formula. Not. Acceptable.

And the only reason I am not announcing tonight a major public campaign this fall on this issue is—and this is the last-minute plot twist we love in movies—that last Thursday, Minister Sandals met with us and we were able to raise this issue with her in person. First of all, my appreciation—and the appreciation of this board—to the Minister for showing the respect locally elected trustees deserve. She gave what we have wanted for a while—the commitment of time and attention to our issues in Peel.

Did she write us a cheque? I wish—back to that magic movie again. But she did demonstrate a clear understanding of the issue, and a genuine appreciation for the situation we find ourselves in. Now, what we need, what the students of Peel deserve, is action.

The province must fund the high needs special education

students we have in our school now—today—not the ones that were there 10 years ago. They need to use the current, correct data. If they could do that, we would go a long way to solving the fair funding gap.

That must take political will. There is no new money—so they will need to redistribute funds. And that’s hard. But so is the work we have done with our own budget.

Now, the province needs to do the same. The meeting was a great start. Minister Sandals asked Peel Board to submit our suggestion on what a fairer provincial funding model would look like. We accept that challenge and will submit our proposal as soon as possible. And then we wait – to see if the offer of change is sincere.

In the meantime, our students are in excellent hands and their schools are good, safe places to learn. Thanks again to all who contributed to this balanced budget.