

Dec. 1, 2009

Thank you to all of the Trustees for your support. This is such a privilege, one that I work hard every day to earn—but I always appreciate your ongoing support in my ability to do so.

2010 will mark my 13th year as chair of the board and my 22nd year as a trustee. I have said before that I never intended to stay this long and I have no idea where the time has gone—but I never forget that our foundation was built by those of you here tonight. People who gave their time, their energy and their commitment to children to build what is now one of the very best school systems in North America—the Peel District School Board.

As we recognize the 40th anniversary of the Peel District School Board, I'm pleased our honoured guests can join us. Isaac Newton once said, "If I have been able to see further than others, it was only because I stood on the shoulders of giants." In the room tonight are some of those Peel board giants—the people who literally built this organization.

Earlier this evening we all shared some memories in a special legacy reception. And I would like to express my thanks to pianist Dan Luong from Rick Hansen, hot appetizers prepared and served by students from Gordon Graydon Memorial Secondary School, under the direction of Ed Wilson, and the flowers were prepared by students from West Credit under the direction of Jo Burnside.

The legacy being recognized here tonight is a school system of quality, caring and success. This evening I would like to recognize some people for their contributions—and I include our current staff and trustees in that group of builders. So, can I ask all of the superintendents and associate directors—past and current—to stand and be acknowledged? And I would like to personally recognize former directors.

And now my colleagues—would all trustees, current and former, please stand for some deserved acknowledgement? And I would like to specifically highlight our former chairs. To all of you and those that could not be with us tonight, our thanks for a lasting legacy that is unmatched. I hope you know how much your service and dedication to public education is sincerely appreciated and valued.

Forty years ago, in 1969, society witnessed some remarkable events. The moon walk. The John and Yoko's "bed in". Woodstock happened—as did the election of Richard Nixon. And significant creations included WalMart, the Concorde, the GAP and the ATM.

But, closer to home, was the creation of the Peel County Board of Education. Now, I know Judith will deliver the director's report for this year, but I can tell you that looking at our first annual report in 1969 is quite an eye opener in terms of how far we have come—and how much remains. In 1969, the board served a community of a quarter million residents—about 20 per cent of the population today.

My parents were amongst those residents and I was one of the students in the new Peel board. In 1969 I was finishing my last year of high school—anyone remember grade 13? I was at Port Credit Secondary School, having previously attended at Queen Elizabeth Senior and before that the brand new Kenollie Public School.

I would have been one of about 50,000 students in 114 schools. Today? About 150,000 students in 235 schools. The budget then—\$41 million dollars—a bit less than our current budget of over \$1.3 billion.

There are so many things about our school system then and now that reflect the changes in society, for instance in special education. In 1969, we had 2 itinerant special education teachers and seven speech language pathologists. Oh, and we had one itinerant teacher for new Canadians—after all, even in 1969, 29 per cent of our population was from immigration with the number one source being 61 per cent from Europe, followed by eight per cent from the US.

Now, 48 per cent of the Peel population is from immigration with 58 per cent from Asia and the Middle East, and Punjabi is the number one language spoken after English by our families. And we have 451 ESL teachers.

But beyond the numerical differences, many of the issues being dealt with in 1969 are the same kinds of issues we grapple with today—things like growth, curriculum changes, and the need for continuous improvement.

But there are a couple of 2009 issues I believe are truly unique. One is the new all day learning program. We all know the value of early learning—the sooner we can have education play a key role in the life of a child, the greater the positive impact on that life. As a board we have a deep commitment to early learning. With the

leadership of Jim Grieve, we are a founder of Success by Six in Peel, and we have intentionally funded vital early learning hubs and readiness centres in some of our schools.

Now, there are lots of questions about how we will roll out all day learning in Peel, and no shortage of challenges in Peel. But I believe we need to go on record as a board in full support of this program. It is absolutely the right thing to do for all children. What an advantage children in all day learning will have as they enter elementary school, secondary school and the world after school. We cannot underestimate the boost they will receive in school readiness and world readiness. It addresses so many inequities that impact student success. I applaud the move by the province to implement a program not only that parents in Peel want, but also that children in Peel need.

Obviously, the funding we have for 105 classes next year will not help the children in the other 885 classes who will not have access to the program. And that is a shame. And there will be parents, and school staff, and trustees unhappy with that process.

But we also need to balance that disappointment with a glass half full approach—one that recognizes the immediate and long term benefits to hundreds of children who will benefit from a seamless, positive and powerful all day learning experience next year.

But—and you knew there would be a but—the process for this year cannot be the process for the years ahead. As a board we have a strategic plan—our Report Card for Student Success—that spans a number of years. Last week, the ministry called to discuss our concerns and I explained our need for a 5-year ministry plan for early learning. And that plan needs to be developed together now, to map out the schools to be added each year—and mathematically it should be more than 105 a year if we want to implement fully within 5 years. The plan needs to provide us with capital funding now. We must have the funding to ensure the program is available not just where we happen to have space, but rather where we have the greatest need as we roll out the classes. This is a key priority in the year ahead.

Another issue, that perhaps is not so new to our legacy colleagues, is our funding. We have spoken of the issue many times, and so let me put the problem, and the solution, on the table. Each year, as a board, our funding compared to other Ontario school boards continues to erode, primarily because the ministry does not use the most recent data to calculate our funding. As a result, we are the fourth lowest funded board in the province. And that must change.

So why does this happen. Well, what's wrong are the numbers the province uses to calculate our grants. The three most significant grants rely on data that is dramatically out of date. This discrepancy creates serious funding disadvantages for us, and for other boards like Peel that have changing demographics.

Simply put, the province funds us quite sufficiently—if this were 1996. Because the funding allocations for some of the most major grants—such as the Learning Opportunities Grant—are based on the 1991 and 1996 census data!

Now, I have to ask, has anyone driven around Peel in the last week? Does it look like it did in 1991? Or even 1996? Of course not—but we are funded as if it were. As though we have not grown by more than 33,000 students with over 93 distinct ethnic groups, more than 60 languages and a newcomer population that represents about 45 per cent of the region's **total** population. But those numbers are real—and we see the need every day in our schools.

And I know we're not alone. The Region and "The Fair Share For Peel" has been stressing this same message for over a decade. I remember Hal Brooks' work in this area years ago and the fact that our Social Services experiences the same inequities based on outdated data.

So the other priority for me—and for this board—in the year ahead must be to make sure the province not only recognizes the need to use the right numbers to fund our board but begin to close our per student funding gap. Now...we know and appreciate the fiscal realities of the province right now—they are not able to solve this gap in a year—or two or even three. That would be unrealistic in any economic climate—let alone the one we have now.

But we need—and must—see progress in the right direction. The erosion must end. We need the ministry to acknowledge the issue with the data, and work with us to align our funding with our real student needs. And the student needs today—not in 1996.

So though we plan to have meetings with all school councils in January and engage all parts of our community in making their voices heard on this issue, I intend to immediately ask to meet with the minister and her staff to see if we can be collaborative and develop a solution to this funding problem. Maybe we can get some answers—and some action—that will help us to avoid the need to upset and activate our community. Will this work—I am not sure, but it is worth one more last try.

However, what is sure today, as it was 40 years ago, is that the reputation of this school system has been built by the people in our schools and centres—including the legacy honourees with us tonight.

The work of each of you in this room has built a school system that has an enviable reputation. Your work—unlike the songs, the trends or the fashions of the last 40 years—has left a lasting and powerful legacy.

There is an old quote that says those in education affect eternity—you cannot tell where the influence stops. Each day you served students in the Peel board, you had an impact on eternity. On uncounted students who learned and grew and became successful because of you, and your work.

I want to assure you that your legacy is valued, and appreciated and continued. Now, every day our amazing staff help students find their smile within—and we, as trustees, appreciate their work, their commitment and their dedication. From all of us, thank you to the staff now and past for a lifetime of service to Peel children. It is your work that inspires us to do the best we can at the board table.

Thank you for your personal contributions to the successes we've experienced over the past 40 years. And for the privilege again of serving as your chair.