

Guideline Remarks
School Council Information Events
February 2010

Tonight we have come together, my trustee colleagues and I, to talk to you, as our partners, about a critical issue. As a board, we are in an enviable position compared to many school boards in the province. We have a balanced budget linked directly to the learning needs of our students. We have a Report Card for Student Success with eight clear, defined goals to support schools.

And, thanks to provincial funding, we were successful at reaching fair, negotiated settlements with all employee groups. And that's very good news indeed for staff, students and parents. But there's not much more good news to go around.

We all know the pressures at the provincial level in terms of the economy—we hear it in the news every day. But I have to say that it is deeply regrettable that the province cut our benchmark funding for textbooks by about 15 per cent—around \$1.8 million. A reduction the province says is permanent. And then to slice another \$1.8 million out of our computer budget—at a time when learning technology is essential—that's inexplicable. As is the reduction of almost \$3 million in professional development—the exact training that our staff use to be able to meet the changing needs of children in Peel.

Now, you may not have seen these reductions at the school level because centrally we made the decision to prevent some of these cuts with our own funding. For example, we believe that we cannot reduce computer funding in a technological age, so we actually did not reduce our budget for computers—even though our funding fell by \$1.8 million.

Of course, those reductions are frustrating. But they're being dealt with by most boards in the province. Our issue, however, is far beyond these reductions. It's about our intolerably low per student funding. For a number of years we've talked about our funding gap. We've talked about the entire provincial funding model, with its unrelenting focus on supporting school districts with declining enrollment. Not only does this focus fail to help Peel, it puts us at a huge disadvantage.

In the past our enormous growth helped mask this problem. Now our growth has leveled off—and the mask has fallen. And there's no way to hide it.

It's interesting to me that our government now is using new buzzwords around education financing. They want us to be more "frugal" and find "operational efficiencies." Well, I have to say that I can't imagine how we could operate more efficiently—and Peel already does "frugal" very well.

Years ago, school boards were raising a large portion of their revenue by local taxation and a number of urban boards were better funded than rural boards. A conservative government, at the time, took control and centralized all public education funding. The government said it created the funding formula to “provide more equity of funding” for all public school boards.

What has happened since, over the last 10-12 years is Peel's funding position has fallen behind most other boards and the government, now a Liberal government, continues to underfund the Peel board relative to other boards. This is a principle of equity and our government continues to ignore us.

Year after year, we've demanded that the funding gap between what the average per student amount and the amount given per Peel student must be closed. Instead it has grown. We're the fourth lowest funded board in the province on a per pupil basis. This means that Peel students receive less funding than students in many other boards in this province.

In 2002-03 that gap was about \$459 per pupil. And from that point on we have been clear that the amount of the gap was unacceptable. That we did not expect to magically have the funding increase to the full provincial level—but we certainly expected that the gap would not grow.

But it has grown—dramatically. That \$459 per pupil underfunding is now a shocking **\$838** per pupil. An erosion in funding of \$379 per student. To put this in blunt terms, the value of **change in the gap** is a whopping \$52 million. That's just the value of the **change** in the gap! The value of the gap itself? Well, that's an astonishing \$117 million.

The obvious question is—why? Not necessarily "why is there a gap," but rather "why is the gap so large—especially between similar boards"? When we discuss this with the Ministry of Education and I assure you, we've

discussed it many times, we get the same answer: each board is different, and we should not compare ourselves on a per pupil funding basis.

I guess that's easier to understand when you are not the fourth-lowest funded per pupil. Maybe that rationale is easier to comprehend when you are in a board like Toronto that gets \$251 **more** per pupil than the average—\$1,100 more than a Peel board student—and rising! But, the Ministry says, you should look at similar boards, not a big urban board like Toronto. Ok, so then why does Peel receive \$141 less per pupil than the Dufferin-Peel Catholic Board? Or \$86 less per pupil than the York Region board? Or \$670 less than Ottawa-Carleton? Where is the logic there?

Clearly, this underfunding isn't easy for me, or my trustee colleagues, to understand or accept. It's not clear to our senior administration, who have to balance this gap with the growing demands of our schools. It's not understood by our school council members, parents, staff or students who, quite honestly, deserve to at least have parity with our neighbouring boards.

So this year we dug a bit—quite a bit in fact. And looked for the real reasons why there seems to be so little fairness in our funding and the results are shocking.

The reasons? To start with—the numbers are all wrong. Not our numbers. Unfortunately the gap is a real one. What's very wrong are the numbers the province uses to calculate our grants.

We need to look at the key reasons we receive so much less per student. And the bottom line is the three most significant grants rely on data that is dramatically out of date. This discrepancy creates serious and unacceptable 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? No, of course not. In fact, since **2001** we have 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.

Along with the explosive growth in population, unfortunately, also comes a significant number of our children and families who live in poverty. All of these statistics are completely excluded from the database used by the ministry to allocate the funds that are specifically intended for these very students! According to the province, these children are simply not here!

But you know they **ARE** here—you see them each day in your schools and you see our staff who do such an amazing job of caring for all kids. These children have a right to be served—and we have a right to the funding to serve them well.

But—unfortunately—there's more. As you will see, the cost of the special education services we provide significantly exceed the funding for special education. We provide \$16 million more in service than what we receive from the province. Although the funding formula for special education is complex and again the data is far outdated and unrelated to our actual growing incidence rate, the reality is we receive the absolute lowest per student funding for high needs students. We receive an indefensible \$300 per pupil less than the provincial average and \$135 less than the GTA boards.

The third issue is early childhood education. Our board has gained a reputation as a lead board in early childhood education. But we have frankly done it on our own, with the tremendous support of our community partners. As a board, compared to other GTA municipalities, we have one of the largest increases in the growth of school-age children in the GTA and the second largest growth in children 0-6. But when the province gave out much-needed funding for new parent literacy centres, the number given to Peel was woefully inadequate. The province must change our funding to reflect the **very real growth** in our preschool population.

So now we know a little bit more about why we get less than all but three Ontario boards. So there's just one question—what is the province going to do about it?

Well, they will argue with our numbers—I can promise you that. They will say again that it is not fair to compare per pupil funding. That boards are

unique. That we receive other funding, like the money to build new schools. That it is not reasonable to expect \$177 million dollars in new funding. That this is a time for the province to cut—and no new money is available. They might even say that we don't need the money that much—after all, we had a budget surplus last year.

And we did have a surplus. Last year we ended up with \$14.9 million due to very specific issues—such as the fact that utility costs were so much less than anticipated. And that money was all used at year end to cover costs—such as the pandemic preparedness, or put away to guard against future increases in utility fees. It was a one-time situation. But it does not take away from the reality that our per pupil funding has continued to erode dramatically.

And yes, we have had more funding from the province in the last 10 years—as has every other board in the province. You would expect increased funding with new ministry-mandated initiatives like primary class size. But while our enrollment has grown by about 14 per cent, virtually every other Ontario board has declined. Yet, somehow, they still have received proportionately MORE per pupil than we have. I don't disagree that the ministry needs to help boards in decline, but it appears that we have been punished financially on a per pupil basis for being a growth board! .

And the truth is, we are not just comparing ourselves to other boards—we are looking at the fact that our own local per pupil funding has plummeted by \$379 per pupil in the last six years. The fact is we receive \$838 less per

pupil than the provincial average. And we are the fourth lowest funded board in Ontario on a per pupil basis.

And no, we are not asking for that \$838 per pupil gap to be fixed this year. We know the provincial financial realities as well as anyone. We don't expect to get a cheque for the \$1,100 more per pupil that Toronto receives—though that would be nice. But we do expect—in fact we demand, that the per pupil funding erosion stop. And we do expect that we will receive some assurances from the province that there is a plan to bring our per pupil funding in line with **similar** boards, like York and Dufferin-Peel.

Imagine the difference we could make for students if the funding gap began to close. Let's say, for example, that we received another \$200 per student—that would be over \$28 million in new funding for schools. I know what parents would want us to do with that money, in terms of text books, and classroom computers—but there are so many organizational needs in everything from ESL to special education to resource staff. The difference would be felt by our schools and students—and the funding is deserved.

And, to do that, there are three actions we need the province to take. **First**, the province must use the most recent—2006—census data to allocate the demographic component of funding. **Second**, they need to fund the actual high needs students we serve as a board in special education. And **third** they must revisit the early years grant funding to reflect our preschool population.

To us, there is no reason in the world that these changes cannot begin this year with our funding for 2010-2011. The province has the 2006 data, use it

to determine the money we receive for local learning opportunities. Let's not focus on the per pupil issue—just help us to meet **our** local needs with the funding the data shows we deserve.

Is it too much to ask to be funded based on our actual student population? On the students we **really** serve already? On the young children that are truly here in Peel? We don't think so—and we hope you agree.

As a board, we think these requests are more than just realistic. In fact, we think they are more than requests. That time has passed. This year, the funding erosion must stop. The funding allocation must begin to change this year. The province may not have any new money in this economic climate. We know that. What we are asking for is difficult but required—the province has to redistribute their funding to boards and allow us to adequately resource our schools to support student achievement.

We know we deserve more. And our children are relying on us to deliver on something they hear almost each day as a playground rule. Play fair. Now that's what the province must do—play fair with our funding.

With our director and senior staff, we have delivered this message to the ministry and personally to the Minister for years. I know they recognize our position and our need for equity, and they have committed to a comprehensive funding review in 2010. This review must reflect change for Peel board.

We have thus far been unsuccessful in stopping the funding erosion, and the situation keeps getting worse. We've resisted delivering this message to parents and school councils, but clearly, politically correct is not working. We need to help the ministry understand that this funding inequity must come to an end and that the children of Peel deserve more.

As a board, we need to do more to get the attention of the province around this intolerable funding inequity. This school year, no matter what it takes, we must spread the word about the real and unfair reasons that Peel children receive less money. And we need your help to bring the voice of Peel parents to Queen's Park.

We want—we **need** your help in making that message known. It is our sole and most powerful key message as a board of trustees this year. It's time **now** to talk to everyone we can. Elicit all the support we can. Involve anyone and everyone from our city councilors to community groups, media, our own MPPs to create pressure for change.

That's what tonight is about. To involve you, our council partners, in making change happen. In getting fairer funding for Peel students. To help, we have a package for you tonight with a few simple tools. There is a list of local MPPs and key contact information for other political leaders, a template letter to use as a starting point, and a template email. There is a set of notes to use in your next school council meeting to let your council members know about this issue.

As well, all of us here tonight—all of my colleagues—are available to come and talk to your council—to deliver this information—all you have to do is ask.

We recognize that each day schools do a fantastic job of balancing off the severe funding inequities to help children succeed. And school councils are an important part of the magic that is spun in making a real difference in the lives of children. Each day you support staff and help our students find the smile within and we deeply appreciate your efforts. I have seen this work first hand and I have to tell you that we are so proud of our reputation that you and our staff have helped build with these exceptional contributions—and you have our thanks for what you do each day.

Hopefully, working together, we can finally make a difference and receive the funding we deserve. But, have no doubt, that despite the funding shortcomings, we will continue to deliver the most amazing school experience in the province.

Only with your help will we stop the funding erosion—and it is our students who will benefit from our collective efforts. Again, my appreciation for all you do to help support student success.