

Janet McDougald, Chair, Peel District School Board
Budget Meeting June 9, 2009

Good evening. We are here tonight in an enviable position compared to many boards in the province. We have a balanced budget. I would like to thank the team in Finance, especially Associate Director Carla Kisko and Controller Christine Beal for their hard work and leadership in preparing this budget. I would also like to thank Director Jim Grieve, Associate Director Judith Nyman and our senior team of superintendents and controllers, who I know work for months—gathering input from the system to ensure our funding priorities are linked with our revised system goals for 2009-2013.

I think we should be proud of the fact that as a board we not only continue to align our budget with our goals and projects—this year we have actually sharpened that focus. This is the year I truly believe that the filter for what will and will not get funded is our board goals and projects—and that these projects and goals are focused on the learning needs of our students.

Unfortunately, this is not a year when I can praise the provincial government for the same unwavering focus on student success. Yes, to their credit they did fully fund our agreements with staff. And in doing so we were successful in reaching fair, negotiated settlements with all employee groups.

And that is very good news indeed for staff, students and parents. But there is not much more good news to go around. I believe the true measure of commitment to children is not so much what is **said** in good times, but rather what is **funded** in bad times. We all know the pressures at the provincial level in terms of the economy—we hear it in the news everyday.

But I have to say that it is deeply regrettable that the province cut our benchmark funding for text books by about 15 per cent—around \$1.8 million. A reduction the province says in permanent. And then to slice another \$1.8 out of our computer budget—at a time when learning technology is essential—that is unexplainable. As is the reduction of almost 3 million dollars in professional development—the exact training that our staff use to be able to meet the changing needs of children in Peel.

All of those reductions are frustrating. But they are being dealt with by most boards in the province. Our issue, however, is far beyond these reductions. It is about our intolerable per pupil funding amount. For a number of years we have talked about that funding gap. How the entire provincial funding model, with the unrelenting focus on supporting school districts with declining enrollment, is not only not helpful to Peel, it is causing us a huge disadvantage.

In the past our enormous growth helped mask this problem. Now we are flat lined in growth—and the mask has fallen. And there is no way to hide it.

Year after year we have 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 all know the gap is significant. We are the fourth lowest funded board in the province on a per pupil basis. In 2002-03 that gap was about \$459 per pupil. Now, a shocking \$838 per pupil. A difference of \$379 per student. To put this in blunt terms, the value of **change in the gap** is a whopping 52 million dollars. That's just the value of the **change** in the gap!

The obvious question is—why? Not necessarily "why there is a gap" but rather "why is the gap so large – between similar boards"? When we discuss this with the Ministry – we get the same answer—because 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. An actual increase of \$30 per pupil since 2002-03.

But it is not easy for me, or my colleagues around this board table, to understand or accept. It is not clear to our senior administration who have to balance this gap with the growing demands of our schools. It is not understood by our school councils, or parents, or staff or students who quite honestly deserve more. At least 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. No—what's very wrong are the numbers the province uses to calculate our grants. The three most significant grants rely on data that is significantly out of date. This 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 1996? Or 1991? No, of course not. In fact, since **2001** we have grown by over 33,000 students with over 93 distinct ethnic groups, over 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 living 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—unfortunately—there's more. As you will see we continue to significantly exceed the funding for Special Education. Although the funding formula for special education is complex and again the data is far outdated and unrelated to our actual growing incident rate, the bottom line is we receive the absolute lowest per pupil amount of high needs amount funding. We are an indefensible \$300 per pupil less than the provincial average and \$135 less than the GTA boards.

Finally, our board has gained a reputation as a lead board in early childhood education. But we have frankly done it on our own, and with 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 centers, the number given to Peel was woefully inadequate. The province must change our funding to reflect the very real growth in our pre-school 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?

Let me help with three actions. **First**, the province must use the current—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 pre-school population.

Honestly, is it too much to ask to be funded based on our actual student population? On the student we really serve already? On the young children that are truly here in Peel and are pre-school age?

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 gap must begin to close. The funding allocation must begin to change. The province may not have any new money in this economic climate. We know that. But 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.

Each day our staff, no matter what their role, balance off the severe funding inequities and help children succeed. They give a lifetime of service to the children of Peel. Each day they help our students find the smile within and we deeply appreciate their efforts.

It is their work that encourages us to do the best we can at the board table. And I think as a board that 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. With our Director and senior staff, we have delivered this message to the ministry and personally to the Minister. 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 know we deserve more. Our staff deserve better. 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.

As a board, we have resisted delivering this message to parents—to school councils. I'm suggesting politically correct is not working. We have thus far been unsuccessful in closing the funding gap and the situation is getting worse. Each year we make the same remarks but this has now become critical. So it's time, this fall to talk to everyone we can. Elicit all the support we can. Involve anyone and everyone from our city councilors to community groups, to media, Success by Six, unions and federations, our own MPPs and OPSBA to create pressure for change.

Hopefully, working together, we can finally make a difference and receive the funding we deserve.