

NEWS release

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Peel board funding cuts show province's financial commitment to education is 'lost in translation'

"Referring to student-focused staff as 'back office expense' sounds like Mike Harris talk," says chair

Trustees of the Peel District School Board approved an operating budget of \$1.55 billion and a capital budget of \$1.72 million for the 2012-13 school year. This balanced budget is a \$2.9 million decrease in provincial operating grants from last year.

"The budget before us tonight—all appearances to the contrary—is not a book, or even a binder. It is really a means to an end—the way we achieve our mission to inspire success, confidence and hope in each student," says Janet McDougald, chair of the board. "And behind the budget before us tonight—behind this critical means to our collective end—is countless hours of work and endless difficult decisions."

McDougald commended board staff for having done the very best with the reduced funding from the province. Notes McDougald, "Of course, we all know the financial situation in this province, the country, the world. Equally, we know we need to do our part. In fact, long before we received the budget, we had asked each department to reduce discretionary budgets by three per cent across the board. Through the administrative budget process there have been other savings found by reducing office staff support in secondary schools, for example."

"But right now most people have the sense that the government's plan—and it is their plan—to freeze salaries, grids and change sick days—is the economic price to pay for maintaining education funding. There is good reason for people to believe that—it has been very well messaged from the province. And messaged often," notes McDougald. "In fact, it was a commitment front and centre in the budget news release with a lofty promise...the 'government will continue to build on its plan to have the world's best-educated workforce to ensure future prosperity in the knowledge-based economy.' Wow. Impressive. But somehow, lost in the translation, is the financial commitment to actually attain that goal."

Adds McDougald, "When all the numbers are crunched, all the beans counted, all the information run through the government's budget software, the end result is not positive for the Peel District School Board, for our staff, for our students or for our community. In fact, it is fair to say this has been the most difficult budget for this board since this 'education government' was elected."

For many years, Peel trustees have asked and continue to ask for the funding formula to be reviewed, and for the gap between the provincial average per student amount and the amount given per Peel student to be closed. Although some progress has been made, there is more to be done. "Now, I want to be clear, this is not about support or lack of support for this government or our local MPPs—we recognize and acknowledge the progress made, the funding provided, the peace and stability in schools, the innovative and powerful programs introduced in the last eight years. But all this does not justify unconditional support when we have to cut literacy teachers, for example...our reduction of \$2.5 million was higher than we deserved...As well, the board remains the lowest funded board on a per pupil basis for high needs students." McDougald explains.

The board maintains these cuts are unfair, “as is the arbitrary cut to our maintenance budget of about \$2.4 million this year, and four times more than that next year for a total reduction of \$9.6 million. Once again, as a board, we feel punished for having been efficient and effective in building new schools while closing under-enrolled older schools. After all, that was the government direction. Now, the boards with those older, under-enrolled schools will actually get more maintenance funding this year,” notes McDougald.

“This is simply not fair. Not fair to our students and communities who make such excellent use of our schools. And not fair to our extraordinary custodial and maintenance team who do an extraordinary job of keeping schools spotless. The extra year to phase in was helpful, but I would respectfully remind the government that when we received the increased LOG funding that our students deserved, they phased it in over four years,” says McDougald. “I would ask the government to phase this reduction in over the same number of years—and to reduce the amount to something fairer for the students, staff and taxpayers of Peel. This will be a key issue we will raise with our MPPs so their voices can be heard. As well, the funding formula has got to be addressed. Our per pupil funding gap continues to be inequitable relative to neighbouring boards.”

Continues McDougald, “I am also, frankly, concerned about the kind of language and messaging I now hear from the province. In their May 29 news release about ‘protecting gains in education,’ the quote was, ‘With enrolment down significantly since 2003 and projected to continue to decline in the coming years, Ontario needs to focus limited taxpayer dollars on the classroom rather than administration and back-office expenses.’ I haven’t heard that kind of talk since the Mike Harris government.

“This is an outstanding budget report, given the funds available. With the commitment from all our hard working staff we will continue to focus on the success of every student, but if the government would have the courage to address our growth by reviewing and redistributing funding, we could do so much more. To this end, we will continue to advocate for all our students and staff in Peel,” says McDougald.

For more information about the Peel board budget, go to www.peelschools.org. For a complete copy of the budget, call 905-890-1010 (or 1-800-668-1146) ext. 2012.

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Note to media: Download [the full text of Janet McDougald's budget remarks](#) on the Peel board website at www.peelschools.org. Click on the news release in the “What’s New” section of our homepage.