

Board urges lobbying for special education funding

By Bill Rea

The Peel District School Board is mounting a lobbying effort to get the Province to change the formula when it comes to special education funding.

The effort has already started, as Board Chair Janet McDougald appeared before Caledon council last week, successfully gaining support there. She's also been meeting with representatives of school council's throughout the Region, talking to about 50 representatives Tuesday evening at SouthFields Village Public School.

McDougald stressed this is a lobbying campaign. "It's not adversarial," she said, adding local MPPs have been approached to advocate on the Board's behalf. She's been urging people to lobby their MPPs, Education Minister Liz Sandals, Premier Kathleen Wynne, etc. She's also calling on people to spread the word through friends, colleagues, leaders of faith communities, etc. She also said this would be a good water-cooler topic.

McDougald believes the board is getting short changed when it comes to Special Education High Needs Amount (HNA) funding. She has stated the Peel Board is funded the lowest of all 72 boards in the province per pupil for HNA. The Board gets \$339 per student, while the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board gets \$375 and the Halton District School Board gets \$601.

McDougald told the meeting the Province established the funding formula 10 years ago, and has never recognized the growth in Peel since then. At the time, the Province called on boards to report on their rates of special education students, but the method of calculation varied between boards, and McDougald agreed Peel might not have done its figuring to perfection.

"This is 10-years-old, and nothing has changed except the growth in enrolment," she said.

Throughout her presentation Tuesday night, McDougald raised the issues of fairness and equity, stating that's not being followed with this funding formula.

She also said it's not just the students with special needs who are being impacted, but all students. The Peel Board has about 22,000 students with special needs.

Peel is at the bottom of the range, in terms of the amount of per-pupil money it receives. The top board receives almost \$1,700.

McDougald agreed there are additional burdens on some of the more remote boards, justifying them receiving more. For example, if a psychologist is needed to see kids, that person would have to be flown into some of the more remote areas.

She added comparing Peel's figures to neighbouring boards in the Greater Toronto Area carries a stronger argument.

The result is the Peel Board spends about \$14 million more on special needs students than it receives in grants.

"That is not overspending," McDougald maintained. "It's under-funding."

She added addressing the needs of all students is a Board priority. "It's simply the right thing to do," she said.

The \$14 million has to come from somewhere, McDougald said, meaning there's an impact on all students.

McDougald said there is a formula used to distribute about one per cent of the special education grants that predicts the incidents of needs in a community. This method is supported by international experts and it could replace the HNA formula.

Applying it would place Peel somewhere in the middle of the pack among school boards, adding between \$14 million and \$16 million annually.

McDougald said the Ministry of Education is looking at changing the model, but to give Peel more would mean taking money away from other boards. She added MPPs are going to be reluctant to see boards in their riding have to give up funding. "It's all political," she said.

"If we gain, someone's going to lose," she observed.

"We need you to make this happen," McDougald told the meeting. "We know that you have more influence than we because you have votes."

Trustee Stan Cameron called the effort "a labour of love" for trustees.

He added he's discussed this with Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones. "She was very understanding," he said.

McDougald said it might be optimistic to hope there will be any changes to the grant system this year, although she's hoping to see a sign from the government that they will review the formula. If there's no response because of politics, she said this will become an issue in the next provincial election, which could come this year.

Director of Education Tony Pontes was sounding more optimistic. "We never say it's done before the money's in our hands," he warned, but added he's cautiously optimistic.



Peel District School Board Chair Janet McDougald and Director of Education Tony Pontes addressed Tuesday's meeting. Photo by Bill Rea