

Cameron pleased with funding for special ed ? Peel Board passes \$1.7 billion operating budget

Trustees of the Peel District School Board have approved an operating budget of \$1.7 billion and a capital budget of \$114 million for the 2014-15 school year.

The board will continue its support for key initiatives, including the board's Vision for 21st Century Teaching and Learning, The Journey Ahead: Our Action Plan for Equitable Hiring and Promotion and activities related to increasing student retention and attraction.

"I'm very pleased with the recent budget," commented Caledon Trustee Stan Cameron, who highlighted the fact the Board has more money to support the special education needs of its students. He said they have another \$14 million to be spread over four years, and he said it was the result of a lobbying effort backed by the Board earlier this year.

"In many ways, that's playing catch-up," he remarked, adding that's always been an area where there's been a shortage of funding, meaning the necessary money had to be taken from other priorities.

There are benefits coming from the freeing up of those funds, Cameron observed.

He said the busing eligibility distance for Grade 1 students has been reduced from 1.6 to one kilometre. "More Grade 1 children in our board will be eligible for a bus ride," he observed, adding the busing eligibility distance for high school students has been cut from 4.8 to 3.8 kilometres.

Cameron was also pleased that a regional science and technology program will be offered at Macville Public School starting this September. It will be starting in Grade 6, and run for three years with 56 students per grade per year, and interested students will have to apply and meet certain criteria to get in.

"We are at a time in Ontario education that is both exciting and perilous," commented Board Chair Janet McDougald, who noted the budget was approved in the final days of the provincial election campaign. "Exciting because the key financial issue we identified one year ago, fixing the formula for high needs special education funding, has been resolved ? favourably ? and so we can do more for students. And perilous because we face an incredibly uncertain financial future no matter what the outcome of the election this week."

"We look tonight at a budget that has significant enhancements for our schools and students," she added. "That is positive and creates hope. We again came to the table, focused on the projects in our Report Card for Student Success, and guided by our mission statement ? to inspire success, confidence and hope in each student. And make no mistake ? each decision we make, each item added to the budget, each taken away, all reflect that mission and what is best for students. These are not just words ? they are how we do our work together."

Despite the uncertainty, the board will add significant enhancements for students and schools.

"Through our Fix the Formula campaign, we worked tirelessly to deliver the message about fair funding to our community," McDougald observed. "And the province listened, and they acted. We now expect, as we asked, a phased-in implementation of a new formula for the High Needs amount that means millions in new funds for our students. Through that process we, as a board, also made commitments. We talked about how we had to take the \$14 million in underfunding for special education from other areas of the budget, and so each and every student was affected. We said if we had enough money to solve our special education funding issue ? not spending issue ? we could reallocate our money to things parents have asked for."

"We have already voted to lower elementary and secondary busing distances ? a long-time goal of this board and a long-time ask of our families," she added. "With our StAR (Student Attract and Retain) initiative we see \$850,000 in the budget sent directly to schools to support school and extracurricular activities. And, yes, we have also significantly increased the number of teaching assistants in our schools, based on the clear and identified need."

"And we have gone beyond that," McDougald remarked. "We are allocating \$1.3 million to improve school curb-appeal and adding a central role to boost high school sports. We are adding and supporting more regional programs and at the same time re-focusing on the strength and benefits of choosing the excellent local school through the Peel Board Advantage fairs."