

Meeting this Tuesday ? School board taking case for funding to community

By Bill Rea

The Peel District School Board believes it's getting short changed when it comes to when it comes to Special Education High Needs Amount (HNA) funding, and is taking its case to the community.

The effort started Tuesday as Board Chair Janet McDougald appeared before Caledon council, seeking support.

As well, a meeting is planned for this coming Tuesday (Feb. 18) at 7 p.m. in the library SouthFields Village Public School, at 110 Learmont Ave.

McDougald told councillors the Board has started the effort to fix the funding formula for special education, with presentations before school councils, municipalities and community leaders.

The council unanimously voted to direct Mayor Marolyn Morrison to write a letter of support for the Board to Premier Kathleen Wynne, Education Minister Liz Sandals, Finance Minister Charles Sousa, local MPPs, municipal councils and the Board. McDougald maintained 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 councillors the Province established the funding formula 10 years ago, and has never recognized the growth in Peel since then. While she agreed the formula is complicated, she said it was created by a flawed process. Board staff had to see each kid who had special needs was identified at the time, and things have not changed.

"It was as if it was captured in a moment of time and has been applied over the last 10 years," she commented.

Board has about 22,000 students with special needs, McDougald said, adding the number has been increasing for some time. She observed the cases of autism are more common. She pointed out people move to Peel, attracted by the services available for such people and world-class hospitals.

As things stand now, the Board's spending on special needs exceeds the Provincial funding by about \$14 million annually.

McDougald admitted with an operating budget of some \$1.5 billion, that doesn't sound like much.

"We scrape and scrounge another \$14 million to support special needs students, because we know that's the right thing to do," she commented.

She said an improved formula is available, and the Province is aware of it. McDougald said it's realistic, asking only for a reallocation of the money available.

She said she believes the revised formula would result in between \$14-and-15 million per year for the Board.

"This is not a problem of over-spending, but under-funding," McDougald said.

She also agreed that if the Peel Board gets more money, some other board has to lose it, and that will require a political decision.

Realizing some board might have to lose money, she said they would suggest changes be phased in.

"I don't know how we can be more reasonable than that," she said.

Morrison harkened back to what she called under-funding from 20 years ago when she was a trustee on the Board.

Councillor Gord McClure commented he has six grandchildren.

"This is something we've got to think about," he remarked. "The kids are our future."

McDougald admitted to Councillor Allan Thompson officials from the other boards might have done a better job 10 years ago when it came to getting more money from the Province. "We can't unring that bell," she observed, adding the process was still flawed because it lacked consistency.

"Peel is a magnet," Councillor Richard Paterak observed, adding he moved from Dufferin County about 30 years ago because of the schools in Peel.

"We just have to look at fairness," Councillor Nick deBoer said.

McDougald told him Peel is penalized because data has not been updated.