

September 5, 2006

Important information for parents/guardians and students

2006-07 school year underway

Budget deficit remains a major issue for Dufferin-Peel

Welcome to another new school year, the 37th since Dufferin-Peel was formed in 1969. This year, we will operate 141 schools and serve approximately 89,000 students. Through our continuing education programs, we will serve more than 40,000 additional learners. We are one of the largest and arguably, one of the most diverse school boards in the province. Whether you and your child(ren) are joining us for the first time, or you are returning for another year, we welcome you to our Catholic learning community and encourage you to get involved in your local school. We also encourage you to communicate with us and let us know how we are doing, and how we may be able to serve you better.

Despite the budget challenges being experienced by Dufferin-Peel and many other school boards across the province, we anticipate that great things will continue to take place in our schools and classrooms every day. In Christ-focused learning environments in schools throughout Mississauga, Brampton, Caledon and Orangeville, teachers will teach and students will learn, grow and transform into what we expect to be well-rounded, solid citizens. We are a Catholic faith-centred school board that puts Children First and we are proud of our tradition of delivering a quality Catholic education to our students. This is our commitment to you.

We do, however, face serious financial challenges; challenges that we have communicated to our community over the past year, and which have been well documented by the media. The same budget deficit issues we face are being faced by other GTA boards. We continue to maintain that there are major problems with the province's education funding formula and that the root cause of our budget deficit is underfunding, based on this deeply flawed and outdated formula.

We wish that we could focus on an area other than budget as the highlight of our year-opening message, but this, unfortunately, is a critical matter for our entire community. The following will provide you with a re-cap of the past year and a look at the next steps to take place in our budget process.

Since April 2005, we have been meeting with the Ministry of Education to press the fact that underfunding in the areas of special education, transportation and salaries has placed undo hardship on our system and has provided a great disservice to our students.

Board and Ministry staffs held a series of meetings last Fall to express our concerns regarding underfunding. Following these meetings, we launched our highly successful public awareness campaign, "Mr. Premier Help Us, Don't Hurt our Schools", in which parents/guardians and students played a key role. The Minister of Education of the day claimed that underfunding was not an issue, and that the government had invested millions of dollars in education.

In February 2006, the Ministry appointed two investigators to review the board's finances. In their report, the investigators identified service cuts that the board should consider, but they also identified that underfunding was an issue. The report recognized our board for providing an excellent level of service to our community and doing many great things for our students. The investigators acknowledged that our motivation for refusing to submit a balanced budget was that we were loathe to reduce the level of programs and services we provide to our students because we believe our students deserve, at least, the present level of service provided. Our position remains unchanged on this point.

In April, the newly appointed Minister of Education acknowledged that the funding formula had to be reviewed. This was a welcomed reversal of position from statements made by the previous Minister. The Minister subsequently went further, stating that it will take the government at least two years to replace the funds removed from education by the previous government.

In July, the board accepted the Ministry appointment of a “special advisor” to assist us in developing a deficit management plan to achieve a balanced budget position. This advisor and his staff met with board staff throughout the summer to outline potential service reductions and to lobby the government for additional funds. On September 6, the report of the advisor will be placed before us for comment and action.

We have been able to reduce our original estimated deficit of \$15.1 million through hard work, strategic replacement of staff, reduction in planned expenses and a number of one-time service reductions. These factors and other specific actions, listed below, indicate how the board has continued to seek to lower the deficit while steadfastly claiming that underfunding is at the core of the issue.

- Freeze on vacant positions,
- Reduction of summer secretarial hours,
- Open positions under cap not filled in plant services,
- Freeze of professional development
- Strict expenditure control by many departments and schools,
- Allocation of operating expenditures to Capital,

Over the past year, some additional revenue has contributed to the reduction of our deficit:

- In-year Ministry funding for fuel and transportation,
- One-time Ministry initiatives,
- Ministry funding for community use of schools,

Together, these actions have resulted in a final estimated deficit for 2005-06 of \$2.5 million. However, this amount is carried over into our next fiscal year, resulting in an estimated deficit for 2006-07 of \$16.6 million.

While many school boards have reportedly managed to balance their budget this past year, many have done so, only by using reserve funds. This is something, you may recall, that we had been able to do until last year. Many boards have publicly stated that they will have to incur service reductions next year now that their reserves have been depleted. Our neighbouring Peel District School Board has used reserves to balance its budget, and has identified underfunding in transportation, in particular, as an issue. Both the Toronto Catholic and public boards continue to press the issue of underfunding in the media. Many media stories over the past month have highlighted the fact that the province’s education funding formula needs to be fixed, a point we have raised repeatedly with the province.

Trustees will receive the proposed Deficit Management Plan at a special meeting on September 6. Millions of dollars in service and program cuts will be included in this plan. Subsequent meetings will be held on September 11 and 14. All meetings are open to the public and start at 6:00 p.m. at the Catholic Education Centre, 40 Matheson Blvd. West, Mississauga. A final decision on the plan and our budget is expected to be rendered on September 14. Trustees will be holding additional public information meetings between September 7th and 13th. We encourage you to attend if you can, or call your local trustee to voice any concerns or questions you may have. If the board decides not to approve the plan, the Minister has indicated that a supervisor will be appointed.

For more information on our budget issue, visit the board website at www.dpcdsb.org.

May God bless you and your family.

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