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# Engaging our Future

*First Annual State of the Board Address*  
Tuesday January 28, 2014

## Introduction

It is my pleasure to welcome you all here tonight for our first annual State of the Board Address.

The comprehensive report we are presenting to you this evening is an incredible story of success. It also clearly addresses the challenges we have faced together, as a Catholic education community, throughout the last year.

The report is entitled: “***Engaging Our Future.***”

Our goal through the presentation of this report is to assure our students and their parents or guardians that we are wholeheartedly committed to continuing our proud tradition of providing exceptional Catholic education.

Three years ago the Board of Trustees directed board staff to develop a plan to address some of the financial, operational and human resources issues facing the Board, understanding that the resultant plan would be both unpopular and difficult to implement. The report before you is very much a product of their courage and vision.

The story, however, involves far more than finance and operational processes. It is very much about the successes of dedicated teachers and support staff. Principals and vice-principals had incredible pressure placed upon them to manage the instructional process and in so doing to place this Board among the highest achieving Boards in the Province of Ontario. It is also a story of relationships and public confidence. Working and collaborating with our Catholic education partners at the local and provincial levels has led to a greater sense of public confidence in the work of our board in its mission.

The Senior Administrative team present here this evening was challenged to embrace a vision that identified the students of the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School board as learners who, guided by the teachings of our faith, can demonstrate academic excellence at the highest levels.

The story you will hear this evening is an incredible story of success as we look to Engage Our Future.

# Corporate Services

The theme of this State of the Board Address is “Engaging Our Future”. Our students are our most vital resource and the role of the board’s Corporate Services Department is to ensure our staff, students and community have safe, efficient and financially viable spaces in which to thrive.

The board’s Business Department has been under particular scrutiny throughout the last year. In the face of seemingly impossible obstacles, I am proud to update you on the department’s achievements and outline some of our challenges in the year to come.

- We have successfully implemented a plan to eliminate the Board's accumulated operating deficit in 2012-13, one year ahead of schedule.
- Under the strategic plan of the board, we have realized a substantial operating surplus in 2012-13, which has placed the Board on sound financial footing as we look to Engage Our Future.
- The Board has moved from a deficit position to now having a \$5.4M accumulated surplus.
- A report in this evening's Board agenda package projects an additional \$5.2M surplus at the end of this current fiscal year. Therefore, at the end of August of this year, the Board is projected to have a **\$10.6M** accumulated surplus.
- In order to continue our work on behalf of our staff and students, we have, in collaboration with the Board of Trustees and board staff, established a framework plan to eliminate the existing capital deficit by 2017. Our expectation, based on our operating surplus and commitment to fiscal prudence, is that our capital deficit will be eliminated ahead of our 2017 objective.
- Among our most important achievements over the last year is our creation of a set of policies and procedures designed to improve and strengthen transparency, accountability, and efficiency. These policies pertain to areas such as procurement, tender processes and all business functions of the board.

Despite these fantastic achievements, the Business Department is not without its challenges. Like all boards in the province, we are impacted by declining enrolment, ongoing reductions in Ministry grants and funding, and a new fiscal reality in the province of Ontario. By working with the Board of Trustees, and all of our stakeholders, our vision is to continue our work as one of the top performing Business Department’s in the Province. Our commitment to fully-funded classroom programs, stable and sustainable finances, and effective fiscal management will not waver.

In the coming year, the board’s Business Department will focus on 3 important objectives:

- The elimination of the Board's capital deficit;
- The management of surpluses as identified in the Board's revised by-laws; and
- Solidifying our role as a provincial model for other boards with respect to sound business practices and financial management.

In conjunction with the Business Department, our Facilities Services Department has made great strides in providing our learning community with safe, energy efficient, and welcoming school facilities. Some of the Department's recent accomplishments include:

- Effective maintenance of aging school facilities, notwithstanding significant surplus space and the resultant cost pressures;
- We have introduced a series of energy saving initiatives aimed at increasing energy efficiency and reducing board costs;
- A reduction in the number of portable classrooms in use.
- The successful implementation of an online permitting system for community use of schools.

Like all other departments, Facilities Services has its challenges. In the coming year, we are committed to:

- Addressing increasing demands to maintain aging buildings and costs of day-to-day facilities management;
- Managing surplus spaces until rationalization of surplus school capacity can occur;
- Resolving the inequity in learning environments for students across the system;
- Continuing to use environmentally-friendly systems and products in our work.

These challenges are by no means minor, but we have a great team committed to the board's vision of providing well-maintained and clean schools, positive learning environments, and effective facilities management for our staff and students. Our work in the coming year will be guided by 3 objectives:

- The implementation of an upgraded maintenance management system;
- The development and implementation of significantly improved policies and processes to guide the effective and efficient operation of the department; and
- To work in conjunction with other boards across the province to work collaboratively in finding solutions to challenges facing our system as a whole.

## Human Resources

It is no secret that our Human Resources Department has had an...*interesting*...year.

The events of the last year have challenged us in ways we could not have ever imagined, but by working collaboratively with the board of trustees, our principals, and our staff, we have persevered and look forward to building strong relationships with all stakeholders. It is our belief that only by working together can we Engage Our Future and our responsibility is to ensure we have the best people to serve our Catholic education community.

One positive that has emerged from the last year has been the opportunity for us to review existing human resources policies and practices, and work to strengthen them. Our Department is guided by 3 essential principles that form the cornerstone of our work: transparency; fairness; and equity. We have recently refined and improved our hiring and promotion policies to guarantee that our students are being served by the best candidates for all positions.

Further to our hiring procedures, we have bolstered our professional development programs so that once someone is a member of our team, they are given ample opportunities to improve, network with one another, and lead. Our employee support efforts have also been improved by refinements made to our Employee Assistance Program. This confidential

service is provided to all employees as a benefit in an effort to assist in health and wellness. The strong interest in this program to date speaks to its need, and its effectiveness, in assisting our labour force.

The primary task of our Department is the staffing of our 38 elementary schools, our 9 secondary schools, and all central staffing. Our approach involves collaborating between various board departments, working with our principals, and all of our employee groups. The other essential task of our Department is the projection of enrolment in each of our schools, divisions and grade levels. Each year the Human Resources Department, in conjunction with other departments, works to properly staff our schools.

Our accomplishments in our staffing model include:

- 90% of all primary classes have 20 students or less at the elementary level; 100% have 23 students or less;
- Our junior-intermediate pupil-teacher ratio is 24.9:1;
- Class sizes have reached a historic low; and
- Our secondary school staffing is accurately set at 22:1 according to the pupil-teacher ratio.

The shared goals of budget compliance, Ministry target compliance, and putting the best people in key positions to serve our system have led to great success in our Human Resources policies. In a board employing over 1600 teachers, educational assistants, and early childhood educators, serving over 22,000 students, this is something we can all be proud of.

Despite the difficulties posed by the provincial labour landscape between 2012 and now, the Human Resources Department prides itself in keeping our students needs at the forefront of our decision-making, while complying with collective agreements. It is important to highlight that there has been no labour disruption at our board in the last 2 rounds of negotiations, and this speaks to the mutual goals of the board and its employee groups of making sure our students are always our first priority.

Among our top priorities in relationship-building has been the formation of joint labour management committees. These committees provide forums in which we can jointly examine issues such as health and safety, professional development, staffing and other labour related issues.

Like all school boards in Ontario, our Human Resources Department is facing challenges that will impact our work in the coming year. These challenges include:

- The ongoing impact of declining enrolment;
- The expiration of current collective agreements in the summer of 2014;
- The lack of clarity surrounding what form this round of bargaining will take in terms of provincial and local processes; and
- The need to continue supporting our dedicated work force through programs such as the newly created Attendance Support Program and the Employee Assistance Program.

Under the Engaging our Future vision, the Human Resources Department will be guided by the following goals:

- Fairness, transparency and accountability in hiring and promotion;

- Maintaining strong and open relationships with all of our employee groups to avoid any disruptions to, or negative impacts on, student learning; and
- Never forgetting that our students are our first priority.

## Student Achievement

It is fitting that my colleagues have spoken first this evening, as it is their respective teams that help to facilitate and organize what we do in the areas of Student Achievement, Special Education, IT, Safe Schools, Faith Formation and Student Mental Health. We rely heavily on our colleagues in Corporate Services and Human Resources to allow us to carry out our mission and mandate in Student Achievement and Faith Formation.

The term 'student achievement' is, as you know, incredibly broad. It is often far too easy to reduce the work of our highly dedicated staff and outstanding students to test scores and statistics, when our daily work as a Catholic educational community is so much more. I will highlight some of those statistical achievements and challenges for you this evening, but also want to mention at the outset the tireless work of our whole board in engaging our students in the example of Christ.

I want to emphasize 2 areas of achievement that are certainly worthy of attention:

1. That from 2009 to 2013, our board increased its Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) success rates by 2%, and went from being ranked 9<sup>th</sup> among Catholic boards in the province to 3<sup>rd</sup>.
2. That one of our schools, Assumption College Secondary, outperformed world International Baccalaureate (IB) scores in every measurable category.

Some of our other K-12 student achievement successes are:

### **Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK)**

- We have successfully implemented FDK in 75% of our Kindergarten classrooms which includes 1700 students;
- This implementation includes the completion of several capital projects to facilitate the FDK program, not to mention the coordination of \$600,000 worth of resources and equipment to support learning for our youngest students;
- We have supported teachers and students with the hiring of 67 registered Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) as part of our FDK teams and offered extensive professional learning opportunities for our staff

### **Primary**

- Between 2008 and 2013, we have seen a 7% increase in Reading, an 11% increase in Writing, and between 2011 and 2012, a 2% increase in Math;
- We have also seen significant increases in all 3 subject areas for our students with Special Education needs.

### **Junior**

- Between 2008 and 2013, there has been a 5% increase in Reading and a 9% increase in Writing;
- In special education and English Language Learners (ELL), there have been increases and Reading and Writing; and
- According to EQAO data, the % of students achieving Level 3 & 4 meets or exceeds the provincial average in 5 out of 6 categories in both Primary and Junior areas.

## **Secondary**

- The board has exceeded the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) success rate by 5%;
- Grade 9 Mathematics results indicate a 4% increase in Academic and a 9% increase in Applied;
- Our graduation rates are strong with 85% in the 4-year stream and 92% in the 5-year stream;
- We have seen a steady increase in Pathway opportunities, which indicates that our students are utilizing the available interventions to stay in school; and
- Through the increased identification of our Aboriginal students and supports provided through partnerships with Turtle Island, University of Windsor and the CanAm Friendship Centre, we are pleased to report that these students are doing extremely well academically.

We are very proud of our students' successes and we believe there are a number of factors that impact these great results:

- All portfolios have been aligned to support ALL students;
- We have worked collaboratively with the Ministry in the coordination of our Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA) that allows all of our schools to easily align their School Improvement Plan (SIP) with the board and Ministry focus; and
- The delivery of effective professional development programs.

Beyond these factors has been the positive impact of technology on the classroom.

By the end of this year, we will have 40 of the 50 schools fully wireless, meaning we will complete our wireless expansion plan 6 months in advance of our original rollout plan.

Blended learning, which is a mix of text and technology, has grown dramatically with over 20% of our student population communicating with their teachers through the provincial management system. This allows teachers the ability to deliver course materials electronically, as well as receive and access student work electronically.

Our newest and most innovative technological advance to date is the inception of MyTools2Go. This is our board's version of Google Apps for education. It is a cloud-based production suite that began with 150 curious teachers to over 500 teachers and classes utilizing the tool. What is even more exciting is that the suite is being supported by our staff....a team of education technology experts, which includes 2 prestigious Google Certified Trainers, Joe Sisco and Laurie Clement. There are only a handful of Google Certified Trainers in Ontario and two of them are our staff.

So as you see, there is much to celebrate. We will not ease up on our focus. We moved from the lower third in our region of 17 Catholic boards, to third, but we're not done yet. There is still work to be done. We will strive to not only sustain our standard, but to continue looking for ways to improve.

As we do so, we will have to deal with challenges along the way. Some of our challenges in Student Achievement include:

- Finding a balance between our improving math scores and our work in literacy;

- Finding creative ways of supporting students within a framework of limited funding; and
- Finding ways to support our Early Childhood Educators and administrators with proper program planning for the Full-Day Kindergarten program.

Our work in student achievement is unwavering and our intention is for our students to continue ranking among the best in the province. Our main task in the coming year is to continue monitoring, reviewing, assessing and evaluating our practices to ensure we remain focused on the needs of individual schools/classrooms/students and teachers.

Included in our successes in student achievement has been our emphasis on inclusive learning environments. With the full support of our Board of Trustees and the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) we have been able to build a strong and vibrant Special Education program. It is who we are and what we are about.

As a Catholic board we believe that all students have a right to attend their community school with their siblings and neighbours. Since amalgamation in 1998, all students have been welcomed into the regular classroom in our schools.

As a result, our staff and students have embraced diversity and are role models in their community for inclusion. I could spend my entire portion of this presentation citing examples, but I will only share 2:

- A teacher who organizes a Saturday morning skate for his entire class at a local arena in order to teach a student in his class with special education needs how to skate;
- The teacher, Educational Assistant and students who encourage and support their classmate with physical needs in attending the Muskoka Woods Experience and once they get there privately gather and propose to their teacher that they have all agreed to forfeit their turn to go on the zip line in order to facilitate the extra time it would take to ensure their classmate could safely be secured to have a turn (as a side note, this student now in high school, is planning and preparing to return to Muskoka as a leader with his secondary school).

We are all better because of inclusion.

I also want to highlight one other great program that has been a resounding success to date. When we launched the Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) program, we knew it would be a welcome and necessary program for our board. I'm pleased to report that we have reduced our reading referrals by over 55% since the implementation of the program. This now allows our psychology staff to focus on other types of referrals and reduce wait times. Our Learning Support Services Teachers (LSST) have become experts in the teaching of reading and remediation. A job only their training allows them to do. Because of the diligence of our Learning Support Services Teachers, they now know the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and have a clearer focus on remedial interventions based upon evidence.

Due to the sheer complexity and diversity of our Student Achievement programs, there are bound to be challenges.

Our most significant challenge is that our special education enrolment is higher than ever, and the Ministry's funding model has not changed since 2006 leaving us in a very difficult position. Not only has enrolment increased in the program, but the severity and types of

need have significantly changed. It is increasingly difficult to meet the multitude of needs with community agencies narrowing their scope of service due to their decreased funding models.

The Full-Day Kindergarten program has also presented a challenge for our special education staff. Many of our youngest learners have not been exposed to a structured day with opportunities to socialize with other children, adhere to established, large group routines, or develop self-help and self-care issues, and independence.

As we look ahead, we continue to strive to provide an inclusive environment for all students where all can learn, based on their ability through appropriate programming and the fostering of independence.

The last issue I would like to highlight is student mental health and well-being. Our board is proud to provide safe, caring, inclusive and accepting environments for our students.

A Student Support Service Team (formerly known as our Mental Health Team) has been established. Our board team consists of our Chief Psychologist, mental health lead, the Vice Principal of Alternative Education, the Consultant of Student Mental Health and Well-Being and myself.

The team has developed an established protocol and Mental Health Strategy in conjunction and compliance with the ministry mandates. This protocol has given us greater insight to the presenting needs across the system and has allowed us to adhere to the ministry mandate of school boards providing proactive and preventative support for our students.

We continue to provide ongoing education and capacity building in anxiety, depression and self-regulation. We have provided numerous series of continuing education in student mental health at a school level, Professional Development days, community speakers, mental health symposiums, online resources, board/community website, mental health toolkits, and student and parent help cards utilized by both the board and Windsor Police Services. Our team is also working collaboratively with the Parent Involvement Committee (PIC) to plan parent evenings in February and April.

As we continue on this journey, we will strive to continue to support student mental health and well being in partnership with our ministry and community partners in keeping with our Catholic Graduate Expectations and our faith teachings.

In all, our students are performing at the highest levels of scholarly and human excellence.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, the future here in the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board is bright. We know there will be challenges, but our trustees, staff, principals, vice-principals, teachers, support staff and, most importantly, our students, are up to the task.

One thing is abundantly clear from this report – that faith formation tops our list of priorities as a Catholic School System. It is the critical component at the epicenter of all we do. It is rooted in equity and inclusion through social justice. What does this mean in real terms?

It means that all we do starts from an unwavering commitment to inclusion. Our entire decision making process is predicated upon the impact on the most vulnerable among us regardless of the challenge they may face, be it physical, emotional or spiritual.

That is what makes us distinct and that is what makes us successful.

Thank you.