

A Message to Parents
From Marilyn Bergstra, Trustee Ward 5
March 2010

As we begin the Lenten season it is a special time of new beginnings, new opportunity and hope. The following Easter message reminds us that we will rise again.

Oh God who called us forth from dust and breathed into us the soul of life and a hunger for immortality and for you, help us to remember that not only are we made from dust and will return to dust but that we are also destined to rise again and live forever in glory with you. Increase our hope and faith so that we will always remember that death does not have the final word over life.

Continuing with the theme of new beginnings I would like to discuss the recent Government of Alberta's budget announcement. It is a time to once again reflect, review and look at new ways of delivering services to meet the needs of our children. The administration of Edmonton Catholic Schools is currently deliberating on their budget process with a focus that we need to reinvent, reanalyze and consolidate services to minimize the impact of budget restraints on students. Services to children and teacher retention will continue to be a top priority. Budget recommendations should be ready for presentation to the Board in the spring.

Although this budget will be difficult, we are thankful that Education remained a priority insofar that we were spared the cuts that many of the other ministries felt. As a result of Government Operational Reviews and the initiation of hiring freezes and discretionary spending freezes, a total of \$1.3B was cut from Ministry expenses. The bulk of this was reinvested mainly to Alberta Health Services with another \$247M redirected to Education.

Although education has seen an increase of \$247M it is important for you to know that this budget did not provide any funding increases to current funding levels. The bulk of this increase in funding is to address a 0.76% increase in student enrolment for the 2010-2011 school year and a 12% increase in the number of students requiring English as a Second Language programs as well as providing specialized programs for a growing number of Early Childhood Services – children with disabilities.

Other than the previously announced Capital projects, there will be no new Capital funding approved for modernization projects or new schools on the District Capital Plan. Further, there is also no funding such as matching dollars or cost sharing for any Capital Project the Board may wish to proceed with and finally, there is no funding approved for any new modular units notwithstanding any emergent needs from any school jurisdiction.

The following grants have been eliminated: Daily Physical Activity, High School Completion, and the Career and Technologies Studies Healthy Pathways Initiative. Although we know that these issues are important, I should point out that not a lot of dollars were directed towards these initiatives and so the impact due to the loss of this funding is not as significant as ongoing funding shortfalls in the area of Special Needs, Transportation and Infrastructure.

Another issue that boards are currently struggling with is the recent mediated arbitration announcement that the Alberta Weekly Earnings Index (AWEI) amount for teacher salaries is to be set at 5.99% rather than the expected 4.83%. What this means for Edmonton Catholic is, when taking into account this 1.26% increase for teachers and other staff, a shortfall of \$2.5M. Even if the Minister is able to obtain the \$1.7M for teacher salaries from Treasury Board, our District will still have to fund approximately \$800,000 internally to meet this increase for other staff.

The Government continues to support the class size initiative; however, it has implemented changes that will see funding directed to kindergarten to Grade 6 where the Ministry feels the dollars will have the most benefit. At the high school level, the government has tiered courses into three categories. Depending on the tier a course falls under, funding may be available if it is deemed that those students will benefit from small class size.

I am happy to report that the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement has not been cut and will continue to support projects that improve student learning and health. Also being sustained is the Student Health Services initiative which is aimed at providing such specialized support services for students as speech language pathologists and audiologists.

With respect to transportation, there will be no new funding for Metro boards; however, we anticipate that carrier costs and fuel costs will be increasing. Further and as part of an on-going effort to improve student safety, the district incurred additional costs associated with monitoring carrier compliance in this area. This is an area where current funding levels do not address inflation and are insufficient.

I hope this information gives you a bird's eye view of how recent budget announcements are impacting education. As a significant partner in education, the Board will be working diligently with you as parents and with interest groups to continue the quality Catholic education for our students.

As we work through the budget process, I welcome any comments or suggestions you would like to share with me. As chair of the Board's Advocacy Committee, next month I will give you an update on the Board's presentation to the Edmonton PC MLAs on March 12th. At this meeting we will highlight and address our Board's concerns with the current government funding levels. Further, we will highlight new and innovative partnerships that we are currently undertaking to address issues such as achievement gaps.

I look forward to continuing to dialogue with you on this and other important educational matters. **My next informal coffee meeting will be Monday April 12th at 7:00 p.m. at the Second Cup at Riverbend Square.** Please join me to discuss any important educational matters or to just stop in to say hello. Also, please watch in your parish bulletins for dates where I will be making myself available after Mass to meet with parishioners.

Please mark your calendar for April 13th, when our Board will be hosting another Public Engagement evening. To date it is confirmed that the Minister of Education will be a guest speaker and I have just extended invitations to Edmonton City Council requesting their presence. Council will share information on community programs and initiatives that benefit children and family. Information will also be shared on the City of Edmonton's Youth Council. It is my hope that all school council members are able to attend.

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