

## OPINION

# After 30 years, Janet McDougald is leaving her service job

*John Stewart applauds unprecedented two decades of Peel Board chair*

*MN April 26, 2018*

"Public education was built on a foundation of equity. We are open to all, all cultures, faiths and traditions, all levels of income and ability. All are welcome here."

"If we had a mission statement above every door of every school it would say, 'it doesn't matter where you come from, we want your destination to be success.'"

"And when it comes to serving all of society, I believe those around this table would agree that although the role of school trustee has changed, the key role has ever been and ever shall remain- defender of public education."



**JOHN STEWART**  
Column

No one in Peel has defended public education more resolutely than Janet McDougald, who spoke those words in her December 1999 inaugural address.

Through 20 consecutive years as Peel District School Board chair, McDougald has delivered a

series of thoughtful inaugural speeches where she's set out term goals, called out failed promises from provincial governments and reminded colleagues of first principles that guide their work.

Between those addresses, she's lived by the code she espoused.

At the end of the April 10 meeting, to avoid undue fanfare, McDougald quietly announced she's retiring after 30 years as a trustee - first in Mississauga's Ward 1, then in the combined wards 1 and 7.

In an interview, McDougald said it's the board's unwavering focus on student success that's allowed it to avoid the histrionics plaguing many other boards. "We're not a party or a political board."

Avoiding amalgamation helped make Peel a stable, consistent, progressive board, much-admired in other jurisdictions.

So did McDougald's rock-solid brand of "facilitative leadership" that recognizes the primacy of front-line staff, from teachers to caretakers, who make the system work.

No one is going to miss the Mineola-raised, Port Credit Secondary graduate more than provincial education reporters. She was the calm voice of lived school-level context when ever Queen's Park floated policy fantasies that didn't work for students.

From mouldy portables, to special education deficits, to funding formula structural flaws to main-

taining the green glory of the Britannia Farm, McDougald has been outspoken and wilful - in a good way.

"She is relentless. She doesn't give up. She keeps the board and the system focused on what's best for kids," says Brian Woodland, former board communications director. "Often her position was so singular, it moved the province."

Former Peel board director Jim Grieve says in his lengthy career, "I've never encountered the superb board leadership exemplified and delivered by Janet McDougald."

Perhaps the greatest compliment is that she's never been challenged as chair.

The job was hers as long

as she wanted because no other trustee could honestly think they could do it better.

With three grandchildren in senior kindergarten, the 68-year-old says "it's time" to go.

Her work is a "service job." When anxious families call Friday afternoons for help, she replies ASAP. A school problem is a family problem.

"I know that because I'm a Mom."

What made McDougald such an exemplary chair is that she made that mom voice the voice of an entire, extremely complex, system.

- *John Stewart is a retired longtime journalist with the Mississauga News. His column, My Back Pages, appears each week.*