

Paul Bios.

McDougalD, Janet

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It had been a long, dreary day at Queen's Park gathering input on the educational funding formula.

A parade of school boards criticized the one-size-fits-all funding approach.

"People just threw out so much data and data and more data," recalls Brian Woodland.

"Then Janet sat down and said, 'Let me tell you about a school - Ridgewood Public School in Malton.' She explained what the staffing looked like before the formula and how different the staffing looked after. You could see all the reporters' heads go up."

"She had that ability put a human face on something that is incredibly complex."

Woodland, former Peel District School Board communications director, knows retiring chair Janet McDougald will be celebrated for three decades on the board, two of them as chair.

She should be celebrated just as much for "cutting through the clutter" and sending messages to the public, the press and Queen's Park about what really needs to be done to make education better in Ontario.

Woodland calls the retiring chair a "relentless" advocate for public education.

McDougald, who'll turn 68 this week, is a made-in-Peel education success story.

Her father built a house in Mineola in 1944. She went to local elementary schools, graduating from Port Credit Secondary School.

She worked at Simpson's as a fashion buyer but tired of traveling. She stayed home until her two children started school, becoming the first chair of Jump Rope For Heart.

Neighbour Margaret McKee suggested she'd make a good trustee. McKee was retiring as local trustee and Peel chair.

"I decided to give it a try because it was part-time and perfect."

McDougald beat another neophyte, chiropractor Richard Buchanan, in a race where "neither of us knew the issues."

She succeeded Brampton's Beryl Ford as chair in 1998 and hasn't been challenged for the job since.

Five directors of education, 17 education ministers and innumerable trustees have come and gone since she took office.

"When people talk about our board, they talk about it being stable, consistent and progressive," says the grandmother of three six-year-old boys.

"We're not a party or a political board. That's just the culture



John Stewart photo

Janet McDougald is calling it a career after 30 years on the Peel District School Board, 20 as chair.

# McDougald's steady hand guided board through choppy waters

## Unprecedented 2 decades as board chair

JOHN STEWART  
stewartjohn85@gmail.com

of Peel."

That culture is engendered by her insistence, privately and publicly, that trustees focus on student success and honour the critical front-line roles.

"I don't think people understand what it takes to be a teacher, senior administrator, principal or vice-principal. It's getting more complex. They're so committed. They'll do anything to solve a family's problem."

Although she deplores the disrespect of the Mike Harris government toward education, its decision to remove boards' ability to raise taxes proved

"liberating. Then we could concentrate on our core business, which is not raising money, it's teaching children."

McDougald will forever be associated with the Britannia Farm. Several efforts to finance its preservation as a farm/school/nature preserve failed miserably.

In this term, the board and cross-purposes. A new plan may transform it into the showcase outdoor education facility and agrarian heritage piece long desired.

She'd love to see the saga end

but "it's time," says McDougald.

From the days in the 90s when a Tax Coalition member dressed as The Grim Reaper to this term, when a delegate tore pages of a holy book and police were called to the board chambers, McDougald has been a steady influence.

Her laser focus often provoked charges of inflexibility and arrogance from outside organizations.

It endeared her to Peel's public school family.

She believes the board has improved community engagement, making parents allies in

campaigns such as Fix the Formula and broadening its school-closing review process.

"It's terrible when you close a school and people lose memories. Many schools represent a whole community," says the departing chair.

If the board can show consolidation will be better for their children, parents will make the sacrifice.

McDougald has the usual scars from a school-review that spawned construction of a new school that trustees named for her - adding controversy to consolidation.

She never believed a new school would be built in her ward, let alone one named for her.

In retirement she plans to thank the system for "the amazing honour" by helping children learn to read at McDougald P.S. because "reading is the foundation of everything."

It will be full circle for a woman who rose to the very top of the system by understanding its strength lies in its student-focused foundation.