

Dear MLA's of the province of Nova Scotia,

I have chosen to write this letter to you, rather than write comments on social media. I share these important words with you because on Monday February 13, 2017 you will have the power to control not only my future, but more importantly my students' future. I currently teach grade 2, and I am not willing to see MY little people suffer due to legislation that the Premier seeks to impose. I am hoping, for the sake of the future of our province, that this letter will at least give you pause to consider blocking this move.

Let me begin by describing to you a typical classroom environment, and the great variety of student needs that exist. While every learning community is different (some classrooms have students with even more needs, and others may have less), it is vital to recognize and understand that students and teachers experience a great number of challenges every single day. To respect the privacy of students, the following description is a realistic example of today's classroom. In this typical elementary class, you may have:

- 22-25 students
- A potential for 1-2 students diagnosed on the autism spectrum (requires resources)
- At least 1 student with global delays (require resources)
- At least 2 students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (requires resources)
- At least 1 student with severe anxiety about school (which requires resources)
- 3-4 reading below grade level (requires resources)
- 3-4 reading above grade level (requires resources)
- 3-4 below or significantly below grade level in math (requires resources)
- 1-3 meeting expectations in math very quickly (requires resources)
- A potential for 1 student with significant behavioural challenges (ie: running out of the room, slamming doors etc.)

One school year, due to my classroom composition being particularly challenging, I was given two Teacher's Aides (TA's). One TA was for a full day and one for a half day. Board personnel came to evaluate the status of my classroom, given the greater needs of my students. Representatives determined that I was handling all of my students' challenges, and made the decision to remove my half-day TA. Soon after, the full-day TA position came up for term. Although I lobbied to keep the great TA that I had, she was not the successful candidate. My wonderful TA's, individuals who knew my students and their needs and had built relationships with them, were removed. I was then given a TA who was unprepared for the significant needs of my classroom. We desperately need TA's who are respected and valued enough to be given training when they are working with students with specific challenges (ie: Autism, Oppositional Defiance Disorder). The support of trained teaching assistants is needed so that ALL students have chance to learn and be successful in a safe and positive learning environment.

Although our school does have resource teachers, and a learning centre teacher, these individuals are overwhelmed with the many needs in our school. They simply are not able to give each classroom teacher and students enough time and support. As a result, over the years I have designed and implemented many classroom strategies to help support all of my students and their varying needs. This includes creating visual schedules, maintaining a rewards system for students who require it (first do math then get lego, etc.), learning how to and then administering sensory time with students who required it, and managing several melt-downs a day. Significant meltdowns have led to classroom evacuations, which interrupts learning, to maintain the safety of ALL students. This type of situation also included finding time to have meaningful conversations afterwards with my students. I needed to ensure the safety and understanding of my students and allow them a chance to speak about what had happened. I also needed to somehow find the time in the run of a day to have conversations with the resource teachers, who may not be readily available because they are supporting a great number of other students, about incidents that occurred. Furthermore, I had to update PowerSchool with all behaviour incidences as they occurred so that administration was informed. On top of these cumbersome but necessary tasks, I also gave up after school time to coach soccer. Lunch times were often devoted to keep students in who were not following expectations, for reflections and conversations, or to finish un-finished work (note: they always got a chance to play for at least 20-30 minutes). My struggle to find time to lesson plan and actually teach my lessons is rather ironic, given that this should be the heart of what I do every day.

Teachers are expected to support our weakest and most vulnerable students to ensure they meet outcomes and have the skills and understanding to be successful in the next grade. While students do receive resource support, learning centre time, early literacy intervention, or math Intervention, they still require more support. In an average class, the teacher dedicates a lot of time to guided groups in math, reading, and writing to ensure that the weakest students are given the support they need. This means that average and above students may be given less time with the teacher, and may be in guided groups that are 'fit' in, when time permits, rather than every day. As teachers, we do everything we can do to help ALL students, but some students need more than what even we can offer. We, teachers and students alike, need more support from our government to help prepare our kids for a successful future.

I am NOT a greedy teacher, a phrase that the government is so conveniently using to unfairly sway the members of the public. Why then did I vote no? Was it about two personal days? A lost service award? While I find it deplorable that the government wants to remove negotiated benefits, these are NOT the reasons for my NO vote. My no vote directly comes down to my students, and giving them what is best. Please review the above information, and have an honest conversation with any teacher in the province. We NEED support and we NEED it NOW - not in 5 years after a committee has conveniently met and discussed what is best for teachers. We are coming to you in droves, begging you to hear our voices, and yet the best the government has offered is a letter of understanding. Which means that in two years' time, this perceived benefit (20 million being invested into classrooms and a further 12 million on a

committee for inclusion) for our students does not need to even be on the bargaining table. I am tired of a committee of government experts determining what is best for my classroom. Those who have not been in the job, do not understand. It takes more than a quick classroom visit. Please spend more time in our shoes before you decide what is best for us.

In the years since I have been with my husband, he gets frustrated with me for all the hours I spend at home using photo paper that I purchased, colour printing at home, printing off visual schedules from a program that our school did not have so I subscribed to (\$20 dollars a month or \$100 dollars a year). Yes, it is my choice to make these purchases but I do so not because they are wanted but because they are needed. I spend time cutting and laminating (on the personal laminator I bought for 'at home' projects) countless resources for my students with different needs. Then there is the frustration of lost resources that need to be re-made, or resources that need to be updated because of school changes. There are many hours spent at home marking or reviewing running records, or tracking a behaviour incident on PowerSchool because I ran out of time during the day. Sometimes, you just want to go home.

Many of my hours are spent filling in paper work for TIENET, creating referrals for the students who need it most because I care about them. Meanwhile, the government will tell anyone who listens that our battles are about more money. Which I guess in a way, it is. It is a battle for MORE MONEY for our students. The 'typical' classroom, and the 'typical' learner have changed from 30 years ago. Often, children don't come to school ready for learning (well rested and nourished). These students are what we meet day in and day out. Fostering an environment of learning for THEM requires significantly more resources. For me, this ongoing struggle is about providing me with more resources so that I may do my job and do it well. I am tired. For the past 5 years (more if you include my terms), I have struggled with class compositions which may not be identical to the average example I provided, but are alarmingly similar. At this point, the best the government can provide is a committee to review the issues and determine what the best course of action is. Please, let me save the province some time and money. As teachers, we need:

- More Speech Language Pathologists (SLP's). These individuals do required diagnoses to help teachers identify needs. If students do not receive the required testing they are unable to go on to next steps.
- More School Psychologists. These individuals also do required testing to identify full student learner profiles, as well as behaviour consults to put behaviour plans in place.
- More Reading Recovery Teachers and Early Literacy Intervention Teachers. If we can work together with these individuals to catch students up early, it is more likely that they will stay on track.
- More Resource Teachers. These are individuals who can give students more guided group work or, if necessary, one-on-one support time.
- More Learning Centre Teachers. These individuals provide the learning link (ie: social emotional skills, a calm down space, support for academic time that may otherwise cause an outburst in the classroom) for our most vulnerable (those with explosive behaviours OR autism)

- More Guidance Counsellors. We are unfortunately seeing more and more mental health problems at young ages. These kids need the support of trained professionals so that they can work through the struggles that often impact their classroom learning.
- We do NOT need more committees to determine what the issues are.
- A marking system that works for us, not one that costs 10 million in tax payer dollars.
- Classroom caps to be included in the Education Act for ALL grade levels
- More Teacher Aides- they are our most valuable asset in the classroom
- We do NOT need the government to impose a contract that is not reflective of our current needs. As someone who coaches and plans school clubs and activities for lunch time, and a member of SAC, I will not be participating in any of these events if a contract is imposed.

Please hear our voices and help our students. This is about the future of NS and making it better than it is now. We need help and we need it now. We want what is best for our students. Thank-you for taking the time to read this letter. I hope that you take the time to really consider what is best for our province, our students, and our future.

Sincerely,

Joanna Keith