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To: The Law Amendments Committee, Nova Scotia Legislature

Law Amendments Committee submission re Bill 75:

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My name is Helen Castonguay. I am a retired school teacher and Administrator with 23 years experience at the Junior High level. I have worked on policy development at the board level and have taught at MSVU in the BEd and M Ed programs. I would like to discuss what I see to be flaws in Bill 75 related to two contentious issues, the non existent No Fail and Attendance policies, to indicate that many of you may not even understand the complexities of what you are voting on.

It is my belief that many people do not know what they are talking about when they make and refer to these policies, nor do they understand the impacts they can have on students and teachers and on our greater view of the society we want. We are entrenched in a society based on hierarchy, competitive individualism, and separation and this deeply affects our view of education. Look at pay scales when it is likely that Primary teachers are doing some of the most important work in education. But, we choose to pay administrators more than teachers as though that work is more important. Teachers are paid on the basis on seniority and credentials which is fair if there is equal access to these credentials. Administrators are paid by the size of their staff. Senior Staff are paid more because they are higher up and so on and so on. We live and work in silos and our government operates this way . In a society of hierarchy and competitive individualism we have a belief that some will fail, some will pass, and some will rise to the top and that that is okay – just how it is. But that does not work in a learning environment. Indeed, it turns a learning environment into a sorting

environment. Do we want to simply sort students or do we actually want to help them learn?

Education, Community Services and Health operate as though they were discreet areas unaffected by each other rather than deeply interconnected to the lived experience of the whole person. Students are more than 'bums in seats'. They are vibrant, inquisitive, nervous and self-conscious bodies, minds and spirits wanting to be nurtured and loved so that they might become their fondest image of themselves. They do not want to be sorted.

Even though a No Fail policy does not exist the tacit understanding of moving students on is of no help to teachers or students as it is currently practiced. If a student does not learn the progressions to a skill, but is shunted along anyway, they will never catch up and they will become another school failure. But, if a child has difficulty learning progressions to a skill it does indicate that they need some alternate level of support immediately so that this does not become a lifelong lag in their education. There should be a **No Fail** policy and it should relate to the DOE, Community Services and Health and their responsibility to students. This policy should mean **Immediate Intervention** which could be anything from different ways of teaching or individual help all the way through to testing and support for learning challenges. As long as we remain in our silos we will continue to under-serve those who most need us. Education, Community Services and Health need to work together. And that is why a No Fail/ Immediate Intervention policy is actually important because it teaches us where we are failing our students and that the responsibility is a collective responsibility.

Attendance Policies

I have been coaching boys' basketball and there is a student I have coached for 4 years. He lost his dad to cancer a few years before I started coaching him and if I had an attendance policy that was punitive toward lates and absences he would have learned that you choose between family and what you want as an individual. He would have been well educated in competitive individualism. Instead, he comes to me before practice saying "Helen I am going to be late because I have

to go over to the rink and help my little brother dress for hockey, or I have to leave early because my sister has a sock hop at the elementary school and I have to help her get ready for it, or I can't come because my mom and grandmother are both working and I am taking care of the kids". He would have had enough lates and absences that he wouldn't have been on the team if I had a punitive attendance policy. This young man understands responsibility to himself and others. So instead of learning competitive individualism he learns that cooperation and compassion make for a good world where everybody wins.

As Principal at a school where we went from 55% to 93% of students meeting most of the outcomes in every subject over a 5 year period we did it by changing ourselves through changing our attitudes, our support structures, how we approached things, and most importantly our assessment. Assessment became based solely on what kids knew, not on their attendance, their behaviour or their attitudes. We made it harder for them to fail than to succeed. (Our report which includes how these achievements happened should be in the School Accreditation records of the DOE. Indeed our accreditors said this should be practiced across the province because it was not difficult and it was meaningful. Our system is broken and there are fixes that are not that complex.)

One of the greatest moments of awareness one of our teachers had was when she **questioned her world view** when we were working toward greater success for **all** students. She realized that deep down she always believed some would fail, some would pass, and some would get As. and that that was okay. When she flipped her beliefs seeing that every child could come to that level of meeting an outcome with proper support she realized it wasn't the children that were lacking. It was support that was lacking. Her students became achievers. When students didn't do well on an assessment she responded from a support position. She used the assessment to improve her teaching, not to tell some students they were failures. This was a teacher with 27 years experience.

When I, or our VP, would go morning after morning to someone's house and sit beside a student's bed and say come on get up I am here to bring you to school. We miss you and we want you there. We would go until they finally decided to come. That's making it harder to fail than to succeed because we believed if they

were there they would be successful. That's saying you belong and you have responsibilities. Every policy we have in Education, Health and Community Services should be based on 'You Belong' and I believe that one of the strongest tenets that we should live by in these services is that we, as a caring open and welcoming society, will not fail you. We will not abandon you.

That can happen every day in every building by having policies that support students. We are teaching them that they can be successful, and indeed, we are making it harder for them to fail than to succeed. They learn that they are somebody and they have a place in the world. By supporting teachers to enact these policies we are building a strong and equitable system.

When a child with OCD cannot come to school on a Tuesday because they wear brown socks on Tuesday and when they opened their drawer the brown socks were touching the black socks and their parents could not find the other pair of brown socks because they were in the laundry should this student be penalized by an attendance policy? To have so many of you be made to hastily vote on something you do not fully understand when those who understand it are silenced is repugnant. Teachers, Social Workers and Health Care workers know what is needed and if they were given the parameters within which to work they are best suited to make these decisions.

So, do you truly understand the complexities of this hastily constructed Bill? What the impacts of this Bill will mean on the ground? Are you well informed? Are you willing to alter your world view from a neo-liberal balanced budget at any cost and on the backs of anyone to a compassionate and interconnected equitable understanding of the importance of educating our children. Could you speak intelligently about the importance of every aspect of this Bill? Do you understand the underlying tenets reflected in this Bill and indeed in the whole process of arriving at this point? If not, it is important to oppose it. We know from history what happens when people 'just do what they are told to do'.

To our Liberal members, if this vote is whipped you owe it to your constituents and yourself to cross the floor. Don't give up on your desire to work for Nova

Scotians by obeying a whipped vote. It is quite clear it will end your career as a politician if you misrepresent the position of your constituents.

This is the poem I offered to my colleagues when we gathered as I retired because it was a poem about them. I daresay it is about many of the teachers in this province. And, it could be about our MLAs as well.

To be of use

By Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.