

To: Law Amendments Commission regarding Bill 75

My name is Cyndi Jennings.

I am the mother of two teenage boys, David age 13, and RJ, age 17.

You have heard from plenty of teachers about how the current, less than ideal classroom conditions in our public schools make it hard for them to teach students effectively. I would like to tell you about how these same classroom conditions affect my family on a daily basis.

As toddlers and preschoolers, both of my boys suffered with severely delayed speech and language development.

Even though both boys received intense speech therapy services, they entered public school at age 5 with a very limited vocabulary which put them at a severe disadvantage to their peers. Both boys reached language development milestones much later than the average, expected age and they had a very difficult time learning to read and spell.

In 2010 when my son RJ was in grade 4 he was becoming increasingly frustrated with school as the year progressed. He began to really dislike going to school and would often beg to stay home. I asked the school if he could be assessed by a school psychologist but I was informed that the wait time was 18-24 months. RJ was not a behavioral problem and he tried hard to please his teachers. But I knew he was suffering in silence at school and I had to help him. I paid \$2000 for a private psychological educational assessment. He was diagnosed with severe language based learning disabilities. He was working at least three grade levels behind in all subjects. I was devastated for him but I also felt that at least now that we had the diagnosis, supports would be put in place to help unlock his academic potential. I was wrong. He was placed on adaptations and received the same amount of school based resource center support that he was getting before the diagnosis. He spent his days in the classroom, unsupported and left to fend for himself because the school simply didn't have the staff or resources to offer any more help.

He was so frustrated and so far behind his peers by the end of grade 6 that I made the decision to pull him from public school and place him in a special education private

school, Bridgeway Academy. That same year, 2012, my son David was in grade 3 and was starting to show signs that he was also struggling academically. I took him for a private psych ed and he was also diagnosed with learning disabilities. I made the decision to send David to Bridgeway too because I already knew public school could not provide the supports he needed. Bridgeway offered much smaller class sizes and an intensive reading program. My boys did very well with the Spell Read and Jump Math programs that Bridgeway used. After only 6 months their literacy skills had increased drastically. Their self confidence soared. It was wonderful to watch them both thrive and succeed academically for the first time ever. Unfortunately after 2 years at Bridgeway our family had two events that set us back financially and I didn't know how I was going to afford to keep my boys there. I asked the government to help me with the \$2400.00 deposit that I needed to secure my boys placements at BW for the start of the 2014 school year but they denied any financial assistance beyond what the tuition support program provides.

Sadly, against my better judgement, I had no choice but to place my boys back in public school.

RJ was in grade 9. Although he made great progress in the special ed private school, he was still years behind his peers. He was a very frustrated boy that was unable to keep up in a class of 32 students and he started to exhibit behavioral problems so that teachers would ask him to leave class. He decided that he would rather get in trouble then have to sit in class and feel like the dumb kid. He met very few of the expected grade level outcomes that year but due to a no fail policy he graduated onto high school. That was where things quickly went from bad to worse.

He was placed in math and english classes with over 40 students and had no one-on- one, much needed, in class support. After a couple of weeks he realized that he could not keep up. By the end of the semester he also found out that the rules changed in high school. The system no longer pushed you through. For the first time ever he saw failure on a public school report card. It seems that grade 10 is the year the system is willing to weed out the kids like him rather then offer schools the tools that are necessary to support struggling learners.

My sweet, quiet little boy that suffered in silence for years as he fell through the cracks has grown into an extremely frustrated teenager that has come to resent

school. I am exhausted from having to advocate almost daily for him in a system that continues to fail to address his needs and provide him with the necessary supports.

I often wonder how different things may have been for RJ if he was provided with one on one support in elementary. I wonder how different things might have been for him if there were hard caps in junior high and high school classes. I wonder if he would be experiencing academic success today if only our schools had been able to offer the necessary tools & supports that learning disabled students need. I also wonder if he may have been given those supports if only he behaved poorly at school when he was younger. Would he have had less struggles if he was held back a year in early elementary and had extra time to master the skills he wasn't able to grasp the first time?

It is now uncertain if he will ever one day walk across a stage and receive a high school diploma. I am just about out of ideas and strategies to help him become a high school graduate. Sadly, it may be too late for my son RJ. But I still have another learning disabled son that struggles to keep up everyday and I am calling on

government to once and for all admit that education in NS is in a state of crisis and make a commitment to invest in our schools.

Our teachers need more support staff in their classrooms. Teachers need hard caps and quicker access to specialists that can help struggling students. Kids like mine need more resource center support than what is currently offered. Our government needs to pay attention to learning disabled students. Sadly, I have learned that my family's story is not unique. There are too many children in this province that are not receiving a fair and adequate education. It may be too late for RJ but it isn't too late for David and thousands of other students just like him.

Please do not impose a contract on teachers that does nothing but demoralize their profession and will only continue to inflict harm and neglect on children like mine.

Sincerely,

Cyndi Jennings