

REVISED COPY

To Honorable Members of the Law Amendments Committee of the Legislature

I am a teacher. My name is Murray Metherall and I would like to thank you and this democratic institution for the opportunity to speak. Currently teaching high school I have been in the classroom for 39 years and there is no better job around. Teaching is intrinsically rewarding. If you like numbers for me that is 7600 more or less straight days teaching, and taking an average class size of 36 – 4 over the recommended class cap by the way – this represents how many students over this period of time? The answer is a lot. It's been a great career.

This is a complex situation we are in with many moving parts. In my opinion neither the union nor the government are right or to put it another way they are both right. But the tone! In this book called *Finnish Lessons* it not only talks about the respect Finnish society has for the teachers of its children, it talks about how the Finns work out problems in education in a cooperative and amicable way based on mutual trust. There is no rancour. No name calling or demonizing each other. Why is there that here and what can we do about it? We have to be respectful to each other. We should not be at this impasse and need both sides to return to the table right away and this time seriously and respectfully get it done, finally giving this government a legacy of good will through their authentic investment in our children's future.

We teachers care and are continuing to do a stellar job in tough circumstances. I believe we as teachers should not complain about this quite as much as we do. We can handle it. Most of the time. After all these years I am not and do not feel completely overwhelmed. I believe my colleagues and I continue to strive to maintain the highest standards of learning in our classrooms.

Having said that however, working conditions could be better. There are problems, very serious ones like at-risk learners with mental health issues and totally inadequate support. We need more money in education, plain and simple. If we spend we are going to increase learning. Do we want this? Class caps in all grades P-12 is estimated to cost 41 million dollars. Who can argue with the wisdom of smaller classes coupled with teacher competencies through our new teaching standards? Do this right away. Where is the money? The province will say there is no money. And they are right - a Nova Scotia economy without growth and therefore no increasing tax revenues. So how to pay? Let's have a civil conversation about that and the choices. How about a small tax increase? Would you pay more taxes to improve education if it were spent wisely and you could see it making a difference? Even those without children in the system but for the good of the province and our future? Some might be ok with that. Not misspending tax dollars already collected is another obvious path to success, like a shining new high school where a renovated one will do or expensive new schools in areas that do not need them.

Outside the legislature the other night I heard the slogan "A balanced budget is not worth the sacrifice of our young people's education". Let's talk about that. Huge deficits and debt get countries and consumers into trouble. But one financing option that governments use is deficit spending – at least temporarily – to fix problems and spur economic growth. Balancing the budget is a whole economic theory and mantra that the McNeil government is religiously attached to. Is it right? Not necessarily. An article by Jordan Brennan of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Research Fellow of Harvard

Law School has the headline, *"Nova Scotia Should Follow IMF's Lead and Ditch Austerity Economics"*. Brennan adds, "The McNeil Liberals appear set to rack up budgetary surpluses through a strategy of public sector wage suppression. This is likely to backfire." The federal Liberals are letting go of a balanced budget to spend money on infrastructure and create jobs. Let it go Mr McNeil, or at least loosen up. It can pay off in the ballot box as much as being tight-fisted can. You'll see. Otherwise look out. It's shaky electoral ground you're on right now. A year or two or three of deficit spending to fix this and other problems in Nova Scotia and then back to tight purse strings from then on. Why not? Does this make sense? That 41 million for class caps – how many more NS teachers does that mean would be hired – hundreds? All of them paying more taxes. There you have it – economic growth.

Also outside the legislature I heard the slogan "Mr McNeil you can pay now or pay later". This refers to our union's for sure constitutional challenge to the government taking away our service award. BC teachers won their constitutional challenge to their government taking away a negotiated benefit. Recommending against this challenge based on the fact that there has been bargaining in good faith on it is essentially untrue as the government refused to talk about this award from the get go of negotiations other than to say it was not on the table. The supreme court decision has cost the BC government \$300 million a year. Talk about a deficit. In the meantime bad feeling will exist here for years to come as this challenge proceeds. Put the service award back on the table and do something fair about taking it away like restoring pension cost of living indexing.

My final comment on the sometimes confusing position of my Union on what we really want to improve learning has to do with the hue and cry around data entry, data collection, and standardized tests. As a hopefully thoughtful teacher who wants to be able to measure how much learning goes on in my classroom I am in favour of all three. Although united this illustrates that we as teachers are not all on the same page. I believe it's important for parents, the public, the media, the union, and teachers to know and respect this.

The notion that "testing is not teaching" is an oversimplified slogan that may be false or dangerously misleading. It should say "testing is not as much fun as teaching" and then "but you've got to do it". Teachers love teaching and they shine at it. Testing, marking, recording data is time consuming and a chore. Beyond prep time I've always considered it part of the job to mark after hours or on some weekends. Good assessment is critical to student success. To know how successful the learning has been, what a student does or doesn't yet know, and how to fix that to move on to the next step in their learning. Common assessment also measures how students across different classrooms in a school, across schools and boards, and across provinces and countries are doing in essential skills like reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In the English 10 provincial exam for example we measure English skills and where there are weaknesses. This data is available for the grade 11 and 12 teachers to offer remedial help to bring the student up to a standard before they graduate suitable for the workplace or post-secondary competency. In my opinion, for real student learning meaningful data entry is here to stay. The use of Powerschool to track this learning is a useful tool. The problem of students and parents being obsessed with live scores can be remedied by shutting off Powerschool temporarily. In high school, term marks before Powerschool were only available to students on report cards at the midterm and at term's end. This format of removing the daily rolling percentage mark would help students to

focus on individual test and assignment results to see areas of strength and difficulty, that could then be fixed up with revised marks entered into Powerschool before live marks reappeared. Assessment is valuable only if it is understood by students or parents, and we teachers must reach out to clarify comments and teach assessment language instead of abandoning it as too complicated.

In conclusion, for me, I love the job. I believe in ongoing professional development to master my craft. This fall before Work to Rule I attended an international assessment conference in Portland, Oregon (it rained), with the world's best experts and gurus in the field. I continue to learn.

For the situation we're in, as I've stated here today there's a lot for all of us to consider in a thoughtful way. We're wasting valuable time and energy. Let's spend this productively back at the bargaining table.

"It's not too late to seek a newer world"

- *Robert F Kennedy*

Thank you