

## **We Are All Teachers**

Mr. Speaker; Honourable members of the House; with great respect for the positions you hold and the duty you are obliged with, please respect your honourable positions and bring forward the best decision for this province, rationally and thoughtfully.

Thank you for your time. Thank you for this opportunity. I am writing you today to voice my disapproval of the Bill before the House (Bill 75). I am writing as a teacher, as a citizen of this great province, and most importantly, as a father of two beautiful children, son Casey (age 4) and daughter Josie (age 6). I am utterly grateful to have been blessed in my life. In my professional life as a teacher. As a citizen of Nova Scotia. And finally as a father. Honourable Members of the House, it is these three things that I keep in mind when speaking with you here today.

I believe there is still time for certain members of this House to recognize the need for prudence to prevail. Minister Casey (Education), Minister Regan (Labour), Minister Delorey (Finance) and Premier McNeil, I believe the four of you still have time to carefully think this decision through before taking our province down the wrong path. I am asking you to please reflect on what has transpired over the last two years to get us to this moment. It is not too late, Mr. Speaker. It is not too late Premier McNeil. This is your house today. This is your party. This is a historic time in Nova Scotia. You are leading our province right now. You alone can show us all what it means to be a leader of high quality. Can you show us humility today in this House?

I would like to share with you a moment from my past - a moment when my father was playing the role of teacher (as I think it is relevant to our current situation):

My father was a hardworking man who worked as a Postal Worker In Halifax for over three decades. Before that he was a construction worker. As his son I was always impressed by his perspective on work, life, society, politics and believe it or not, taxes. He would have been a great teacher or politician; he had a charm and a conviction in his voice that would cause anyone in his presence to listen, carefully. He was opinionated at times and would argue a point well. He made you think. He was a Liberal in the traditional sense of the term. That is, he was well balanced; there was a willingness to discard traditional values if they were stuffy but he would be open to new ideas, too, so long as they served a potential greater good for the present circumstance (he mostly voted Liberal, too, though he believed any party could be a champion of the people; he believed it had more to do with the individuals within a party). I remember one day when I was eleven years old, I wanted a new pair of Nike Air sneakers (they were \$100 and the hot new fad at the time). My father sat me down and said, "Son, have a seat. I would like to show you how much money I make." I thought, "Oh great, here we go". He went on. "Have a look at my pay statement. In order to purchase a pair of sneakers for \$100 dollars I need to earn almost double that." He showed me the difference between gross pay and net pay and the taxes that were being deducted off his cheque every two weeks. I said to him, "That really doesn't seem fair. Why would the government do that?" His reply. "That money goes toward important things, son. Very important things that are necessary to invest in for the society we live in, our schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, and so on". It was a hard reality check that day. But his point was not lost on me. He didn't refuse the sneakers. But he asked me if these sneakers were a necessity. They weren't. This was that classic lesson of needs vs. wants. Not long after that I decided to get a paper route and earn my own money. It was liberating. I was able to make my own decisions with my money and feel more self sufficient than ever before. But something

else changed in me as well. Something profound. I started to appreciate the things around me more. Things that many of us take for granted. Number one being education. Going to school - such a privilege! To have an opportunity each and every day to learn something new. My mother always said that "Nobody can take an education from you". She meant it in the real sense, from the things you learn in life. Things of value. She spent many important nights at the dinner table helping me with my multiplication facts, helping me sound out words, and helping me spell and write properly so that the next day in school I could feel confident and be ready for the skills that my teachers would also be teaching us. I believe I had a solid foundation that helped me get to where I am today. Both parents have left a profound impression on me. What I have learned as a teacher is that not everybody has a solid foundation. If public education is the great equalizer in our society, then those tax dollars that go toward education must be used wisely and must be recognized as vital to all who enter the education system. We owe it to the young people of this province a solid foundation, Mr. Speaker.

How about binding arbitration or a conciliation board? Would that not be the best way out of our current situation? A moment of grace by the Premier at this historic time? If we are to be efficient in Education, let us be efficient. But let us be fair. Let us be just.

As for the practical matters. Here are some proposals to consider. I have no doubt all of these proposals would improve the overall quality of our schools:

1. Class caps in all grades: Ideally it would look like this: (P-3 - 20); (4-8 - 25); (9-12 - 30). The most efficient adjustment you could make in terms of money would be to hire more classroom teachers (not mentors or departmental staff, but classroom teachers) because it helps everyone in the system. It brings about real improvement in terms of the student/teacher ratio.
2. An enforceable attendance Policy (you miss 5 classes in a semester (unexcused) and you lose the credit. If it needs to be higher than that (10 classes, say), well at least it is a start. This item is particularly critical in High School. If we can't do this, I am sorry but we are setting students up for failure in the real world. There needs to be an attendance policy.
3. More access to trade courses (within the High Schools like the old days of vocational training). I believe that if you were to hire a few reputable experienced vocational workers who now run some of the NSCC programs, you could enrich these energetic individuals who are bored in school or have no interest in learning about Shakespeare or quadratic equations. This could be a game changer for many students who want the opportunity to learn "hands on" skills now.
4. Less top down initiatives and committees plaguing our schools (Planning for Improvement (PFI) which was replaced by Continuous School Improvement (CSI) to be replaced by the most recent acronym (can't remember what it is now); you have your Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) that are often too prescribed and cumbersome. More autonomy and input by teachers with how things should change just makes logical sense.
5. Let us recognize that the Board level/Provincial level assessments are simply overdone. Do them once every few years (perhaps grade 4 and grade 8 only) if we must do them at all. I recognize the validity of tracking some data or progress, but the more attention and focus we give these assessments the less investment we have in experiential learning for our students. And that is the good stuff. Ask yourself what you remember most about your experiences in

school. I imagine that a provincial assessment wasn't at the top of the list? When teachers get to use their creativity and passion to inspire learning in others, that is when the lightbulb turns on or the sparks ignite so to speak.

6. Less Tienet data input equals more quality time with the students. This is vital for Resource, Guidance and Learning Centre teachers as well as the other specialists within the board (Speech Language, School Psychologists, and so on). As a Resource teacher I love the time I get to spend with students, supporting them on their unique learning path. Shouldn't supporting them be what is most important? Members of the House, we have gotten to a point where the "actual support" of students is being superseded by the "documentation of support"; the data becomes the focus, not the human being. The greatest part of my job is making a connection with a student and helping them grow as a learner. We need more of these opportunities each and every day.

8. Hire more Resource Teachers, Learning Centre Teachers, Junior High Support Teachers, Guidance Counsellors, English as an Additional Language Teachers, School Psychologists, and Educational Program Assistants. This covers a specific range of important aspects of our system that could use direct investment in human capital.

The bottom line is that we must trust the professionals that teach these students each and every day and give them the fuel and energy to do this properly. More resources and more funding on the front lines is money worth spending. If you have to cut any positions that contribute to compromising this energy and fuel, well, so be it. We can respect your need to be efficient with our tax dollars.

I have held a variety of teaching positions in many different schools throughout the HRSB - in Fall River, Spryfield, Dartmouth, Bedford, Clayton Park, Sheet Harbour, Cole Harbour, Hammonds Plains, Tantallon, and several other communities when factoring in my subbing days (Sackville, Herring Cove, Fairview, North and South end Halifax, and so on). These communities are incredibly unique in so many ways. As are the schools. The students, teachers, and members of these communities, contribute to each community in interesting and remarkable ways. To be a part of any of these communities or schools is an absolute honour.

The first principal who helped me get my first term teaching contract told me something that has stuck with me ever since. She was talking about students who do something wrong or make poor choices. She told them, "Your thoughts are for free. They are yours to keep. But what you say and what you do, you have to own." This advice is good for us all. This advice is good for all of you here today in Province House. Let the choices we make today as a province regarding education be choices that we own proudly, together. Move forward carefully and thoughtfully, Honourable members of this House. May this historic moment in Nova Scotia be for the greater good of all.

Respectfully,

Scott Sullivan  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
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