

Law Amendment Submission

For the past 3 years I have been a Learning Center Teacher here in Halifax. During that time I have been bitten, kicked and pushed. I have been shouted at and verbally abused. The supportive teams of administrators and Education Program Assistants that I work with have also experienced this abuse. The complex medical, physical, emotional and intellectual needs of my students require meticulous care. Every day I struggle to balance the diverse needs of students with autism, visual impairment, cerebral palsy, depression and extreme behavior and every day I fail to adequately support these students.

My students are amazing; their families are inspirational; the EPAs who support the Learning Center do fantastic work. In my Learning Center, I run a varied weekly program that includes cooking, yoga, swimming, extra gym time, gardening, social skills programs, circles and a sensory room. Most days I work through lunch and spend evenings catching up on emails and paperwork. There is not enough time and financial assistance to adequately support these programs and the needs of my students. But I struggle on, putting a daily band aid onto a growing problem. The risks of physical injury, mental health and burnout for Learning Center teachers in Nova Scotia are significant. Inclusion does not have to look like this.

Inclusive education is a worthwhile and meaningful pursuit when it is adequately implemented. Successful inclusive education requires significantly more financial support than what we are currently seeing in Nova Scotia. We do not need a commission on inclusion to tell us how to improve our systems. Learning Center and Resource teachers need more support now. The government must increase targeted funding for vulnerable students, including students living in poverty, refugees, African Nova Scotian students and Aboriginal students. An improved systemic approach to support at risk students is urgently required.

Another concern is mental health. The mental health needs of students are growing rapidly and teachers are functioning increasingly as parents, social workers and nurses. Nova Scotia has an alarmingly high rate of child poverty. Children living in poverty attend NS schools every day. Teachers face these students and love and support them as best we can. We dig into our lunches and hand over sandwiches and fruit. We dig into our bags and hand over bus passes, spare articles of clothing and coins. And it is never enough.

This sort of piecemeal approach to tackling the monumental problems of child poverty, mental health, inequality and disability is dangerous. We've collected the data, had the Education Review and struggled on single handedly performing duties that should be halved

in order to adequately meet the needs of diverse students. We know that there are far too many African Nova Scotian students on IPPs. We know that many of our new refugee students have suffered trauma. We know that diagnoses of Autism are increasing. We know that extreme behavior and violence is increasing. We know that anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges are increasing. We have the data already. We do not need a commission on inclusion. What we need is increased funding and support for our vulnerable students.

10 years ago I was working as a Traveller Achievement Teacher in London, England supporting at risk students in the school system there. This job enabled me to liaise weekly with healthcare providers, police and social services and visit homes to build trust and bridge gaps in learning. The government of the UK used the data it had to support vulnerable students and families. Now is the time for the government of Nova Scotia to use the data that teachers have diligently collected and recorded in power school and tienet to lessen the load bearing down on teachers and enable us to implement much needed reform.

The children and young people of Nova Scotia deserve better. The NS government needs to invest in education and provide better infrastructure and supports for all young people, especially vulnerable students.

Respectfully,

Johanna Calder