

Hello, my name is Pearl West and I have been an elementary teacher within the Annapolis Valley Regional School board for the past 27 years. Presently my position is Early Literacy and resource however I have taught Reading Recovery and I was also a regular classroom teacher prior to my specialist positions.

Speaking out at the Nova Scotia legislature is definitely outside of my comfort zone, however I very much would like to voice my concern for the position the education system is now facing. The weather has deemed it impossible for me to venture off my dirt road much less allow me to travel to Halifax to speak in person and the refusal to allow for an extension of the sitting of the committee has resulted in me hoping that my emailed submission will be seen. I need to know that I have at least tried!

As previously mentioned I have been an educator for almost 30 years; I am also the mother/stepmother of 5 children, 4 of whom have graduated from High School and the last who is in his grade 11 year. I have loved my job as a teacher and knew from a very early age that that was the profession I wished to be in. Becoming a teacher was not easy for me, I was not readily accepted into the field as my own high school marks were barely passable and instead of having teaching as my first career I became a Developmental Worker and worked for six years in the Human Services department. Through hard work and further studying I eventually obtained my BEd and have since then acquired three MEds. I am telling you this about my background as I feel it shows just how strongly I feel about being in the schools/classrooms and working with the students. Still today, so many years after being in the profession I still get up in the morning and look forward to heading off to work...to close my classroom door and to work with my students (I don't really close the door, just an expression!) So when two of my own children asked me the other day just exactly what it was that the teachers were upset about and looking for it made me really sit back and look at the situation I and every other teacher within our system is facing.

I do not mean to speak for anyone else, but I also know that there are so many teachers in the schools that are the same as me. We love our jobs, we love our students, and we have accepted the changes within the system and allowed them to happen because we love what we do and who we do it with. More and more initiatives are forced upon us, we are given less for resources yet are required to accommodate children with so many different challenges. The public hears that guidance counsellors have been put into every school and I cannot physically control my emotions as I know that that truly is not the case. The school I am presently working at has a guidance counsellor assigned to us for 1 day of the week. The beginning of the year it was on Mondays and now she comes on Wednesdays. We tried to have it so that she came for 2 half days so she could possibly organize some groupings but the fact that she also services 2 other elementary schools kyboshed that quickly. The same holds true for our Physed and Music teachers; they also are shared between 2 other schools...can you imagine their schedules...their caseloads...their meetings for all those individual students...can you imagine what they must go through during report card time?! I can! I can see it on their faces, I can hear it in their voices; but they continue...we all do (or we have) because we are doing it for the children, our children, who mean so much to us that we have been allowing everything to get piled upon us yet we have continued to make it work, or at least do the best that we can with it.

The rejection of the last 3 (now 4) Tentative Agreements shows that teachers are no longer going to sit back and allow the education system to deteriorate. I will admit, I voted to accept the first agreement. Did I do so because I liked it or felt it was in the best interest of our system? NO, I voted yes

as I thought it would be the best that we would get. I have been in the system so long that I no longer had the vision to foresee changes that were actually in the best interest of the students. Knowing that my colleagues were starting to question the system had me really stop to question my belief.

I had to admittedly say to my children when they asked me why we were rejecting the agreements that the reason is because our system is FAILING. We are failing the students and that we have been for a long time now. That is not easy to admit when you have dedicated so many years to it. As mentioned, I love my job, I love the students I work with. I like to think that I make a difference, I like to think that I am giving them everything that they need, but I know I do not. I am the only resource teacher in my school and service grades primary to five. I support teachers with the students in their rooms that require adaptations, I assist with the implementing and development of the Individual Program Plans, I try to provide as much assistance as I can with the students within the classrooms that require behavior programs, FAIS LITE plans, Speech-language pathologists, Psychoeducational assessments, Occupational therapy, these specialists need to come through my department. I am only one person and I have my own caseload that I see daily. I am not enough, I cannot do it, I have not been able to do it for a long time now. I know that. I have not had a break/prep in my schedule for over 7 years now. I did this to myself, my administrator has said to me "Pearl, schedule yourself some prep time" but when I try to justify my prep time by not being able to see a group of children who so desperately need support I cannot do it. The children need to come first!

THE CHILDREN NEED TO COME FIRST!

It is for this reason the I rejected the following tentative Agreements and that I sit now and try to pen my emotions. I see these rejections not as teachers being obstinate and greedy, but instead teachers are realizing that we are finally to a point where we may be able to make a difference within the classrooms...our classrooms...our schools. And that difference will be for the benefit of OUR STUDENTS...OUR CHILDREN. It is time that we need to start asking for help, we need to start realizing that although we teachers have been giving it our all...our heart ...it is not enough. Changes need to start happening and they need to be concrete, real changes not committees, nor special task groups giving reports of what could /should be happening; they need to be happening now.

I am not asking for more money and I did not get into this profession for a Service Award; in all honesty, I wasn't even aware of the award until well into my career. Will I refuse it when it comes time for me to retire...No, but I am not fighting for it now. I do think it is only fair that teachers receive raises that equals the cost of living for each year though. I know not all teachers feel the same as me with regards to the money side of things, but I do know that there are quite a few that do! It is who we are and it is why we are in this profession; not for the money...not even the summers off (haha) but we are in it for the children...Please, Please provide us with the correct resources to let us do what is right by them!

Thank you,

Pearl West