

Denise MacPherson

Elmsdale, NS

B2S 1A1

February 16, 2017

Law Amendments Committee

Nova Scotia Legislature

1726 Hollis Street

Halifax, NS

B3H 2P6

Dear Committee,

My name is Denise MacPherson and I am a grade 5/6 teacher with the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board. I am appearing today not only as a teacher, but as a parent of a child attending public school in Nova Scotia.

The Premier has repeatedly conveyed that his priority is growing the economy of Nova Scotia. I would like to remind the members that an investment in education is an investment in the economy. Numerous studies coming out of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), The World Bank and Stanford and Harvard universities, have found a strong correlation between a country's quality of education and its economic growth. In other words, countries that invest in the cognitive skills of their children have greater rates of economic growth than do countries who fail to do so. Interestingly, these studies point out that the amount of money invested into the education system does not matter so much as where it is invested – into more educated teachers and towards increasing achievement in literacy.

The Premier and Minister of Education would probably tell me that they have already been investing in Nova Scotia's education system and would name a dollar figure as "proof" that they care about education. However, I am here to assert that despite what the Premier and Minister say, as a teacher, I have not witnessed or benefited from sufficient and appropriate investments in literacy and other program supports that impact our children's cognitive skill development. And, as I will point out, Bill 75 does not adequately address this lack with its non-committal and limited funding and consultation arrangements. Change needs to happen now and cannot wait for studies and committees to meet.

If the government *was* adequately and appropriately investing in education, I would not have taught students in my classes four to five grade levels behind their prescribed reading levels. I would not have had classes in which the majority of students do not read at the grade-specified reading level. I would not have had classes in which 50% of students do not meet outcomes on provincial Math assessments. I assure you that the majority of the students I have taught have the cognitive abilities to achieve and

that the majority of them have had educated, passionate, effective teachers throughout their elementary years. But, we cannot catch students up on years of skills and strategies they missed over the course of 6 years. We cannot successfully help students who are struggling with the resources at our disposal. Students require, and deserve, sufficient literacy supports throughout their academic lives, not just in grades Primary through Three, but until they graduate from high school. This is only way we can bring their literacy levels up to standard. Students above grade 3 are not “lost causes”, they deserve all of the help we can provide – help that can only come from more appropriate and increased investment from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Education, help that Bill 75 simply does not provide.

Members of the public, parents, and family members, have asked me what would make the biggest difference in the academic success of the students in my class. Without hesitation, I have told them the answer is a full-time Educational Assistant, or EA, in my classroom, one who is there to help with academic, not just behavioural, interventions. Every classroom needs and deserves an EA to provide extra one-on-one assistance to both struggling and non-struggling learners.

Many of the students who struggle the most in the modern, inclusive classroom are those with Learning Disabilities or LD, and the second thing I tell those who ask me what would make the biggest impact is access to a Learning Disabilities teacher for every child who has a Learning Disability. Currently in my school board, only some schools have a Learning Disabilities teacher assigned to them; my school does not. Not because we do not have any students with LD, but because we don’t have *enough* of them. In other words, the students with Learning Disabilities in my small, rural school do not have the same access to program supports as students in larger schools. This is happening because there are not enough resources, i.e. money, to go around. Students in Nova Scotia are supposed to have equal access to education, but they do not. As a teacher and a parent, I find this infuriating.

The third thing I tell those who ask what will make a difference is improved mental health support. I am a teacher, not a counsellor or psychologist, and have limited training in psychological interventions, but I take on the role of a mental health professional every day I am in the classroom. Throughout my career, I have taught students with ADHD, Depression, Anxiety, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Autism and Aspersers Syndromes, and Anger Management difficulties. I empathize with these students, but do not have the training to or, to be candid, class time, to teach them the coping mechanisms they require to succeed in the classroom. I am not certified to diagnose mental health issues. These students need sooner access to a greater number of school psychologists. Their families require faster and facilitated admittance to community mental health services. Mental health difficulties impede learning, and before students can achieve to their absolute potential, they need help in overcoming them. It is simple: when students feel better, they learn better.

The During Work to Rule, I have engaged in some of the best teaching in my career. I have had the energy to plan engaging lessons and assessments and feel energized when I start the day. I am not spending time planning for, implementing, and then documenting the evidence of the implementation of top-down initiatives that may not be appropriate for my unique classroom composition, or that often

do not even reflect best practices and research-based evidence, but the political aims of the government in power. I have been doing what I signed up to do – teach.

The Premier and Minister of Education have asked: what do teachers want? Well, I want to be viewed as a valued professional with the ability to exercise the professional discretion I have earned through extensive past and continuing education and experience. I want to be consulted when major decisions affecting my profession are made, as I think most teachers do. I urge the government to abandon Bill 75, and instead ask the 9300 teachers in the province, a ready panel of educational experts, about the state of inclusive education in Nova Scotia, and discover from those on the front-line of education what is needed to improve classroom conditions. Bill 75 just doesn't do this. I encourage the government to heed the evidence and invest in the quality of education and economic growth of the province, and to work with, not against, Nova Scotia's teachers.

Sincerely,

Denise MacPherson
Constituent, Riding of East Hants

Resources:

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Hanushek, Eric A. and Ludger Woessmann, "Education and Economic Growth." *Economics of Education* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2010) pp.60-67. Found online at <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/publications/education-and-economic-growth>.

The World Bank, *Education Quality and Economic Growth* (Washington, D.C: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2007) <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1099079877269/547664-1099079934475/Edu_Quality_Economic_Growth.pdf> 15 February 2017.