

Submission to the Law Amendments Committee

February 16, 2017 after being denied presenting my submission to the Law Amendments Committee regarding Bill 75.

Well NS Liberals, I am the disillusioned, neglected student you apparently don't have time to listen to and you are the leader/teacher overwhelmed with demands to be heard (300 extra speakers when you can only meet the needs of 100). Therefore I will disengage and will tell you nothing except that this is exactly what is wrong with our education system and why students are falling through the cracks. Interesting that the LAC was able to apply 'caps' and considered spreading themselves thin to hear more speakers but instead cut out $\frac{3}{4}$ of who they were supposed to serve – problem-solving by cutting quality and quantity. The only difference I really see is that teachers care and are out in the streets asking for better conditions so they can respond with quality, and you...don't seem to care.

■ Karen McSweeney

Submission 1 for the Law Amendments Committee

Emailed February 16, 2017.

In response to Bill 75

From Karen McSweeney, Halifax NS

These thoughts were intended to be presented to the Law Amendments Committee at the Nova Scotia Legislature either February 15 or 16, 2017, but are being emailed as I was not awarded my right to speak in front of this committee. It should not be surprising that Stephen McNeil's government did not honor the chance for me to speak, but I am well aware that even if I spoke, I likely would not have been heard; that in itself is deserving of a letter of protest but I will stick to my response to the introduction of Bill 75, the so-called and ironically titled "The Act Respecting a Teachers' Professional Agreement."

I refer to this title as ironic because Bill 75 demonstrates no respect and is not an agreement. It is an enforced violation of workers' rights to collective bargaining. It also contains not an ounce of respect for the masses of teachers and education specialists who have spoken to our government representatives about the desperate need for change in our education system - in teachers' working and students' learning environments. Our voices have been broadcast in multiple ways - in letters, e-mails to our representatives, the premier and the Minister of Education, in face to face conversations with our MLAs and the media, and through three strong NO votes and one strong strike vote. Were there respect given to any of these, there would be no need for the Law Amendments Committee to sit today and no need for the massive resources that are being activated this week to recall the legislature to enact an oppressive and harmful bill, and the subsequent cost to protest this legislation.

I think the best way to express my dismay about this bill is to illustrate my path in the last few years, particularly regarding inclusion and data processing. I have been working for the HRSB for 23 years. I taught junior high as a classroom teacher but 'back then' 29 was considered to be a large class size. I have been a resource and learning centre teacher for approximately fourteen years, and over that time have become strongly disillusioned with the bureaucracy of our education system.

I aim to be a teacher who works daily to help my students be a little more competent, a little more confident, and a little more independent. My students take baby steps that lead up to the occasional leap. I work every day to help them move forward in life. Sometimes this means helping them understand a concept or learn a new fact, but most days it means I am supporting their emotional and social growth so that they can function in an environment where they are not comfortable and which is not designed for their learning style or abilities. It also means supporting my colleagues so that they are updated on the individual needs of students and helping them find the resources needed; not a day goes by that I do not appreciate the commitment of, and stressors on, my colleagues as they try to serve the individual needs of the students on IPPs and adaptations while they also look after the planning, marking and management of classes that are diverse, demanding and large in number.

I love to teach and I love my students and even on the worst days -- when I have considered other careers that would suit my skill-set or when my husband's objective perspective says I have put up with too much-- I have known that there is nothing else I am meant to do but to teach, and that I am

meant to teach in a public education system where I can support equal opportunity and where I can show students, regardless of their economic, social or cognitive status, the paths to a fulfilled life where they can achieve their goals, reach their full potential and be contributing citizens who make the world a better place. But I do not love my job. I am constantly in a battle between the ideal of teaching and the reality that faces me each day in the Nova Scotia education system.

The reality is that I do not 'just teach,'--even when we work to rule. The reality is that I walk into my classroom not knowing what the temperature will be and whether, as in this week, the windows will have leaked or blown in and I will find my personally supplied materials destroyed. The reality is that six years ago I became our high school's Department Head for student services and the short version of that is that I held that position for three years before I stepped down in order to maintain my health and a somewhat more balanced life with my own family. The reality is that was necessary because there were not enough hours in the day to fulfill the bureaucratic expectations of the IPP program planning process with teacher and parent meetings, TIENET, school program planning, PLCs, networking with the IWK, the school psychologist, the speech pathologist, the occupational therapist, the fire marshall. Also throw in the transition meetings and repeated meetings and work orders to building operations to provide for the varied needs that were entering each year--and let me remind you how very difficult it is to organize a single meeting when you cannot be reached by phone because you are teaching for most of the day and your meeting times are limited to before school, your lunch hour or your after-school. Policy makers often discount the hours and hours that go into phone tag or e-mails for simply planning a meeting with interested parties and that teachers have to do this above and beyond their other duties. Above and beyond these bureaucratic expectations, one needed to be ready for medical, behavioural, and/or emotional crises, which do not respect deadlines or schedules. Those in the department who make policy do not assess the impact on the teaching day when they ask for more and more and they obviously don't realize that the same policy and expectations can't apply to the elementary school with 5 IPP students and the semestered high school with 80 IPPs where each student has 7-8 different teachers throughout the year. It has always been highly ironic to me that the expectations of the Individualized Program Planning process has never had differentiated parameters for varied school needs. But I digress... Every day I was leaving my job feeling like a failure even though I had not taken a personal minute for myself and I had left my all at the school. I have adopted a coping strategy over the past five years of telling myself as I walk out the door of the school, all the things I accomplished during the day rather than listing what or who I didn't get to -- the problem became that the 'not done' list reappeared in my mind in the middle of the night and I was unable to get a good night's sleep most nights. I made the personal choice to focus on just teaching (because remember that part -- I love teaching!) rather than continuing as a department head. I chose teaching in order to provide a better quality of service to my students. But I am still frustrated by the amount of time I need to spend away from my students to receive downloaded and insufficient PD on somebody's whim, the futility of the paperwork, and the incompetence of the implementation of TIENET -- a ten minute rant all on its own. I guarantee you that creative and highly skilled teams have tried year after year to implement 'answers' to programming and meeting the needs of our students. We take on personal extras in order to implement new programs that keep us constantly learning and planning on our own time. I can also tell you that I have been doing this long enough to see that when we solve one problem another one surfaces and that I have gone full circle and can say with 100 percent confidence that my colleagues and I have scraped the barrels of our resources, spread them thin and they are still not enough.

The message that I am trying to get across is that when it comes to inclusion, demands on teachers and the supports available there simply is not enough support. My responses to past surveys, inquiries and commissions have not changed any actions of the government. This is why I am

looking for real and immediate change. I support the request for caps in classes at all stages because I believe teachers are professional, knowledgeable and talented to handle differentiation and inclusion when they are given a reasonable number of students in front of them. I am rewarded when I see my students walk across the graduation stage and I know that their day by day steps towards competence, confidence and independence have added up to significant growth. I will always love teaching and working with young adults, but I hope that soon I will be able to say that I love my job again. And if I can't say that I love my job, at least I will be able to say that I fought for changes to my job that would benefit teachers, my own children and my 'school kids'.

--Karen McSweeney, J.L. Ilsley High School, Halifax, NS

If extra time: One more point in a simple factual example – last spring TIENET lost teachers' work from over a 24 hour period. There was no apology. There was no acknowledgement of teachers' lost time. There was a simple directive that teachers would need to input their work again – in reality, on their own time. This summer the education department made changes to TIENET that didn't work. Teachers who worked before school opened and into the first few weeks discovered that there were problems with the program and their work hours were futile as well. I was told to hold off on inputting data. I received inconclusive PD in November. Inconclusive because the problems were not fully worked out and the messages coming from the department were unclear. These are added difficulties in my day not helpful or related to the individual needs and unexpected demands of dealing with struggling students. Add to that old technology and unreliable wi-fi and wasted hours receiving assistive technology training that rarely works in the classroom because of tech challenges and you have teachers who are ready to fight for better working conditions.