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**Education should not be a partisan issue.**

The lowest elected office in our current system is that of elected school board member. Yet this is the only level of government where gender parity exists: 55% of members today are women. Already the proposed Transition Committee fails to reach even 50%, or basic gender parity. I am speaking in a room of elected officials where as a woman I am in the minority, but the students I represent are equally male and female. The education system students depend on is a female dominant occupation, yet men are still disproportionately represented at the higher levels of that system. Its fate now rests on the decisions of a party that is two thirds male, and has yet to find its own gender equality.

I have heard the Minister use the words 'Collaborative' and 'Holistic' while introducing this Bill, but this heavy handed approach seems to be anything but. This is the first time I have been able to share my perspective within earshot of the Minister, who has refused to meet with the school boards that will be eliminated. Thousands of teachers are opposed to this Bill, and they do not feel as though this has been a collaborative or holistic undertaking. Although the Black Educators Association is listed in the Appendix of the Glaze Report as a group that she met with, the head of that organization has stated publicly that this is not true; that they too were left out of this collaboration to upend the entire education system of our province. Aren't these the true experts on education in Nova Scotia?

The silos identified in the Glaze Report are not the ones I see. It is not a fractured system of eight isolated school boards and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, with the newly created Council for Improvement in Classrooms added to the mix. Our 8 school boards meet regularly, and work

collaboratively within the Nova Scotia School Boards Association. The silos we are actually facing are those of school boards versus the Department of Education. School boards have been treated as advisory committees, sending our recommendations to a Department that, in my short time in office, seems to routinely dismiss our requests.

I represent District 7, Bedford/South Shore, the largest school board district in HRM. It includes two of the smallest, rural schools in HRM, and an area that has been experiencing a population boom for decades. Nearly all the schools in the CP Allen family of schools are at or over capacity. I have met regularly with the SAC at Basinview Elementary, the largest P-6 school in the province. Their school is operating well over capacity, where classroom caps don't matter when there are no more classrooms in the building. We can continue to implement band aid solutions, filling up the school play and parking areas with portable classrooms, which do not include any additional washrooms than those already in the main school building. The elected board has been submitting requests for capital commitment for a new school in this area for years, which have yet to be approved. Even a commitment today from the government to invest the capital for a new school will not solve the crisis in this and other schools in the area, as it takes years to build a new school. Make no mistake: this crisis is one of the government's making.

Classroom conditions are untenable, over the cap size of 35 students, with 38 students in the Resource Centre alone. Teachers and staff are demoralized and exhausted, desperate for help. This crisis is not one that happened overnight, but over years of the government refusing to recognize the needs of the system, and ignoring pleas from school boards to alleviate the situation. Last week an HRSB report was released with options for temporary solutions for Basinview. Their SAC was overwhelmed with calls from worried parents. When Bill 72 was announced last Thursday, I heard a reporter ask the Minister what SACs with urgent issues should do. He actually said they should contact the school board, which will cease to exist if this legislation passes, at the end of this month. Basinview needs answers **now** to prepare for over enrolment in September. I believe they will be the first SAC to test this new system that claims to empower local voices and SACs. Right now it seems clear no one has answers for Basinview.

Meanwhile, after surviving two previous attempts at closure, I fear the small, rural schools like my children's school, Shatford Memorial Elementary, and East St. Margaret's Elementary, are once again facing risk of closure. Not because they are failing – they aren't. Ask the students and families in those communities that fought twice to keep their kids in their own communities in these schools. But replacing a more democratic education system with a bureaucratic one has me very scared for these schools and those like them. Bureaucracy seems to have a bias against small schools, with student populations of under 100. In a bureaucracy, that number seems to often be the only part of the equation: too small, not efficient, not viable. Time and again when asked, this government has not yet provided an answer to the question of how school reviews and closures will take place in the future.

I am scared for my kids' school. People in my communities are scared. Scared that in the near future a directive may come announcing school closures, with no avenues left for community consultation.

SACs already have a role to play in the system, but they are not prepared or equipped for the role that is being placed on them. Stranger still, they haven't asked for these new responsibilities. Even Dr. Glaze noted the need for term limits and other guidelines for SACs, as they are at high risk of being dysfunctional. A typical SAC is made up of a principal, teacher, parent, community member and sometimes a student. These are volunteer positions that many schools struggle to fill. Last year during Work to Rule, they were unable to meet. You may have an SAC controlled by the same one or two individuals for years at a time – longer than a single student will spend at that school. You will not see the same diversity on SACs that exist at the school board level. We have schools in areas where there may not be a single family from a visible minority. I was involved in my children's school for nearly a decade before running for school board. I am a single parent. My school was not willing or able to change their meeting time so that I could attend. School boards also provide a degree of separation from SACs. If a parent has an issue with a teacher or principal on their SAC, they are unlikely to feel comfortable voicing their concerns.

SACs are concerned with their own schools' needs, but are largely unaware of the needs of others. It has never been their role to be familiar with how the system as

a whole functions. That is the function of an elected board. It seems to me we will basically be asking SACs to rebuild the very structures a school board provides, while scrapping 200 years of work to bring school boards to where they are now. Where African Nova Scotian Representatives have had a guaranteed voice for less than 20 years, and Mi' kmaw board members for less than a decade. In my own work as a school board member, I have been trying to find ways to bring the voices of the LGBTQ community to the table. Although I hear assurances that there will be a guarantee that African Nova Scotians and First Nations will be represented on the appointed committee, more than a dozen of these voices on current boards will be lost.

That is one of many issues I had hoped to continue to work on, when I thought I still had more than two years of my elected term before me. I wish I had time to talk to you about the work we are doing at our boards and the NSSBA. Like the first report on racism and discrimination in our schools, released this January, and the new HRSB policy which took effect last October which, in keeping with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, includes an acknowledgment that we are in Mi' kmaw territory with the morning singing of O Canada in our schools. The work I had scheduled to begin crafting a policy for students and families experiencing financial hardship. My work is not done, and no one has been able to answer one of my questions: what happens to regional board work and policies like these under a provincial system? Will all of the good work done over decades be thrown out?

### **Democracy, not bureaucracy.**

Is our current system perfect – no, it isn't, and I believe school board members would be among the first people to say so. But I know how much work we have done to address the very issues Bill 72 claims to fix, based on the collaboration of our boards. We were ready to introduce in 2018 a new, more efficient governance model which allows for more public engagement in education, not less. This coherent, generative governance model is evidence-based, and was crafted through consultations with experts, and developed by and for the unique needs of Nova Scotians. Instead, we are presented with this Bill, based on the

advice of one paid expert from outside our province, which asks us to create systemic change that we know has failed elsewhere.

The word I have heard most in recent school board meetings, town halls, and in social media is **fear**. This is not the way to govern.

If I had just one wish for education in Nova Scotia it would be that we press pause. That we wait for the Inclusion Report. That legislators would give the same credence and authority to the NSSBA's response to the Glaze Report as the Report itself. That we change this debate which has become hostile and partisan into a more meaningful conversation among stakeholders, one that truly is coherent, responsive, holistic and collaborative.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak. I hope my words have voiced some of the concerns those who were not able to speak before you today would have wanted you to hear.

Jennifer Raven