

Notes for a Submission

By

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To The

Law Amendments Committee

On

Bill 72 –

Education Reform (2018) Act

March 5, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson and members of the Committee for this opportunity to speak to you about Bill 72 – Education Reform (2018) Act. My name is Ian Johnson, now retired after almost 40 years working in the public sector, including 20 years as a researcher/policy analyst with NSGEU. With me is my wife, Olga Milosevich who is well-known as a CBC arts and culture broadcaster for 30 years before she retired in 2012.

We want to see Bill 72 paused and tabled. Ian grew up in the Halifax public school system. We are both parents of grown children who went through the public school system, and we were active participants in our children's education. Olga was a parent rep on the School Advisory Council at her daughter's junior high and high school. Ian spoke at Law Amendments in 1995 when the last education reform bill was going through the Legislature. He was very active in supporting the move to fully elected school boards in the 1980s.

The Process

We are very troubled by the process leading up to and including this Bill. We do not understand the rush by the government to have this Bill passed. It was only on January 23 when the Glaze report was released, and then, for the government to say on January 24 that it was accepting the report and all its recommendations. This was quite unlike what happened with the Freeman report on education in 2014 when the Minister took two months before releasing an action plan after talking with major stakeholders. In

addition, it has only been a little more than a year when Bill 75 was rammed through the Legislature in violation of the collective bargaining rights of teachers.

For such a broad and sweeping report, you would think more time might be required to allow people across the province to read it and to discuss it. We are also very concerned with the rush to proceed with this Bill without allowing any time for meaningful consultation and discussion across the province.

Impact on Education

Dr. Glaze said her report was focussed on moving to "one coherent, aligned model, focused on student learning and achievement". And yet, the government seems to think that this dramatic restructuring can happen over night.

At the same time, we do not accept the conclusions of Dr. Glaze and the government, that the fundamental problem is having seven, fully elected school boards. How can she and they say that the current focus has not been on student learning and achievement, or that by eliminating them, there will be suddenly a dramatic improvement? Why wouldn't having local decision-making help to make that focus achievable, which is what those of us advocating for fully elected boards wanted to see? At that time, we had boards which were made up of one-third provincially appointed board members, one-third municipally appointed members, and one-third elected members.

How can a provincial advisory board, regional education centres, and local school advisory councils replace the invaluable work and role of fully elected boards? This is not to say that everything about the current boards is perfect. The large number of acclamations point to some serious, but not unresolvable problems. The elected board members with whom we have met are very dedicated and working hard for their districts.

In short, we feel Dr. Glaze and the government have completely misread the problems facing education. They are also disregarding the possibility of more focus on assisting teachers and all staff on how to help students in the classroom. We hear teachers and other staff crying out for smaller class sizes and more resources, not getting rid of fully elected school boards.

We are also concerned with the impact of this restructuring on women and minority groups. For example, we understand that 57 of existing board members are women. How will moving away from fully elected boards help to maintain and strengthen their voice and participation? Similarly, what has been done to assess the impact of eliminating designated seats for African Nova Scotians and appointed seats for Mi'kmaq representatives?

Impact on Staff

From what we can see, getting rid of school boards will be far more disruptive to teachers and support staff than by maintaining the boards. The Bill does not seem to answer fundamental questions about who will be the employer, or how collective bargaining will take place? Even, more fundamentally, there does not seem to be any guarantees that existing

collective agreements and their protections will be fully safeguarded, especially for support staff and their unions.

In short, this Bill seems designed to create further chaos in the labour relations and collective bargaining field. I understand very few collective agreements have been negotiated in the public sector since the McNeil government came to power in 2013. This Bill seems likely to ensure that this horrendous state of affairs is continued.

Impact on Public Services and Local Government

This Bill seems likely to be one further factor undermining the value of public services and the value of local government. With the government now effectively running the education system, what is to stop the government from considering the idea of contracting out parts or most of the present public school system? What guarantees will there be in place to ensure that existing services and staff levels will be maintained when local decision-making is lost. Will the government move at some point to eliminate or drastically reduce local, municipal governments?

While these questions may seem far-fetched, this restructuring bill now makes such contracting-out, privatization, and loss of another order of local decision-making, possible. We are very troubled when you consider the results of having one central health authority on the quality of health care in this province: with more and more people without access to primary health care, longer wait lists, and loss of emergency health services. Do we want the crisis in health care to be replicated in education?

Conclusion

For all these reasons, we strongly urge the Law Amendments Committee to recommend to the government that Bill 72 be tabled for much more extensive and broad-based public consultation. There are certainly precedents for this type of action by this Committee, with occupational health and safety and environmental legislation.

Finally, we want to recommend again that for this Committee and its important work, there be no arbitrary limits on the number of presenters, and that the Hansard record of the meetings and hearings of this Committee be made publicly available on the Nova Scotia Legislature website.

We thank you for this opportunity to talk about Bill 72, and we welcome your questions and comments.