

I stand before you this evening to vehemently oppose Bill 72 and to highlight the exclusionary impact it will have on students with disabilities. Specifically, I am here to raise the profoundly concerning omission of language that protects the rights of students with disabilities to be educated in their neighbourhood schools alongside their peers and with appropriate supports. I have watched and analyzed this government's gradual and strategic reintroduction of the language of segregation, a process that clearly gained momentum with the release of the Myra Freeman Report in 2014. I have spoken with the previous Minister on this topic and she specifically asked me if I thought I could have learned with "those children" in my high school classes. She repeatedly attempted to solicit my support for segregation by asking me to specify conditions under which it would be acceptable to segregate disabled students. This has all unfolded in the midst of this government's systematic defunding of the very disability organizations that were established to ensure our voices would be heard when the recognition of our rights was in jeopardy, and in the context of legal arguments advanced by this government that Nova Scotians with disabilities do not have the right to live in community with appropriate support. So, the omission of the language contained in section 64.2d of the current education act was alarming to say the least, and it pointed to a well-planned strategy to roll back disability rights protections in the name of balanced budgets.

I have heard the explanations that indicate government felt protecting the public education system for all students meant disabled students as well, but it is unacceptable to remove specific protective language and give discretionary power over the inclusion of diverse learners to the Minister. I have heard the argument that Bill 72 must be worded in a way that makes space for the report of the commission on inclusive education to be implemented, but no report related to services and supports should ever work against or rely on the exclusion of specific disability and inclusive education

protections. My own education in inclusive school settings was successful in large part because teachers were supported and trusted to facilitate my learning. They were not forced to see me as a set of educational problems to be addressed through substantially separate educational arrangements.

This government has significantly contributed to a protracted labour dispute related to, among other things, working and classroom conditions. The uncomfortable truth is that this battle has played out in significant ways on the ground established by arguments for and against inclusion. Teachers have spoken powerfully about the need and desire to have adequate fiscal and human resources to foster the learning of all their students. So, let me approach this from the perspective of a disabled student who might be watching and listening to this play out in this combative political arena. Here is the daily message, and its devastating impact must not be diminished. No matter how this is shaped, no matter how this is articulated, disabled students are being bombarded by the damaging message that they are the problem with the education system in this province. Their needs are too great, their requirements are too complex, and their access to education costs too much. In short, they are a burden on a strapped education system, and they do not belong. Imagine how this feels, and think about how you are contributing to the perpetuation of this oppressive communication.

So, I am strongly advocating for two specific amendments: First, you must restore and strengthen language that protects the inclusive education rights of disabled students. This must include specific reference to the role of the Special Education Programs and Services Committee that is currently only constituted under Ministerial policy. Nothing short of explicit protective language is acceptable; second, you must amend the sections that speak to the constitution of the Provincial Advisory Council on Education to ensure there is first person disability representation. It is clear to me that this is the only

way to ensure our rights are protected, and it must be part of any legislation that claims to be supportive of inclusive education.

Cynthia Bruce, PhD

Acadia University School of Education

902-698-2885