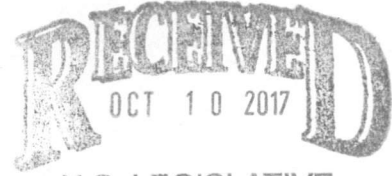


LAW AMENDMENTS COMMITTEE

Red Chamber, Province House

Thursday, October 4, 2017

6:00 p.m.



**Bill #10 - Municipal Government Act (amended) and  
Halifax Regional Municipality Charter (amended)**

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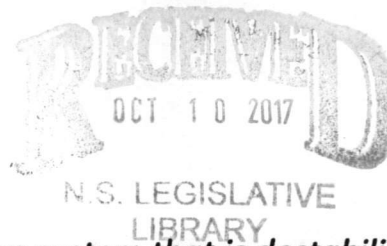
*No representation*

**Bill #12 - Boxing Authority Act (amended)**

*No representation*

**Bill #8 - Pre-primary Education Act (amended)**

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 6:00 p.m. | 1. Allison Garber                                  |
|           | 2. Carly Sutherland                                |
|           | 3. Nikki Jamieson                                  |
| 7:00 p.m. | 4. Sabrina Fenyvesi                                |
|           | 5. Christopher Morash<br><i>Beech Tree Academy</i> |



## **Law Amendments**

*Is it right to add a new program to an education system that is destabilized? Law amendments will be on pre primary and the education system.*

Good evening, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to present my experience as a parent of a child on the Autism Spectrum in terms of navigating the public education system.

My son was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at age four. Our lives changed that day dramatically.

Almost immediately our roles as parents were now to include the role of advocate. This advocacy started with working to increase funding for our province's Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention Program (EIBI) and has now extended into advocating for greater inclusion supports within our public education system.

Following the very heated and emotional labour dispute last year; our family, like hundreds of others across the province, were encouraged with government's creation of the Committee on Classroom Conditions and the Commission on Inclusive Education. Encouraged, yet also understandably feeling vulnerable and afraid of the varied opinions we knew this discussion would bring forward.

In fact, we had already heard many of these judgements during the labour dispute. Our children were a distraction in the classroom. They kept the "other" kids behind. They were a parent's responsibility, not the taxpayers.

These attitudes were, and are, discriminatory. After all, who has the authority to determine that one child has more of a claim to an education over another?

Education is a fundamental human right.

The actions of the government to agree with the teachers that our current inclusion model isn't working, that we need to do better, and to enact the Commission on Inclusive Education provided me with great faith. At the time, I gave full credit to Premier McNeil, and the previous Minister of Education, the Honourable Karen Casey for having the political courage to put inclusion on the table for a thorough examination.

But. Then, out of seemingly nowhere, came the decision to implement pre-primary just a mere months before the start of the school year before any meaningful consultation had taken place, at the cost of \$50 million and rising.

It was frankly bewildering. Had we not, through the creation of the Committee on Classroom Conditions and the Inclusion Commission, recognized that our P-12 education system was in crisis and that a comprehensive strategy needed to be developed, budgeted for and executed in order to remedy the systematic issues at play?

Would it not be prudent and fiscally wise for the government to await those recommendations and the associated costs before expanding our education system? This isn't to mean that pre-primary had to take a perpetual backseat, in fact the planning for pre-primary starting with comprehensive consultation with direct stakeholders such as early childhood educators and private daycares – as well as disability communities who could advise on inclusion supports for younger children, *could have had the time it required.*

Because just as inclusion is an issue in P-12, inclusion will – mark my words – be an issue for grade primary. The Deputy Minister of Education acknowledged recently in Public Accounts that we did not have sufficient Teaching Assistant supports for students within the P-12 system, so how are we going to magically make this happen for much younger students?

This is a serious question of safety. Last week, my son – who is an assessed flight risk – went missing at his school after being left alone in the learning centre. This was not the first time this occurred, but thankfully this time he didn't make it out of the school. He's not alone, recently on a conference call with fellow Board members of Autism Nova Scotia I learned the terrifying story of a grade primary student on the Autism Spectrum who fled their school only to be found a good while later on a nearby highway walking the centre yellow line. Lines, you see, are a great point of interest for that little boy.

One of the reasons I wanted to attend tonight <sup>issues</sup> was to dispute the gross misrepresentation of the ~~concerns~~ <sup>being raised about pre-primary – suggesting that if you</sup> In the recent House debate on pre-primary, a government member took the floor

and essentially attacked anyone who would question the implementation of a pre-primary program. He stated, "I would like to have that question answered because that's truly the question that we're here facing today - wait, wait, wait. Wait for what? Another 850 kids to miss this opportunity?"

I'd like to answer that question for that member today.

have legitimate concerns about the timing of pre-primary – you are completely opposed to the

No. I don't want 850 children to miss an opportunity. I also don't want one single child to meet a tragic fate. And until we can look ourselves in the mirror and say we've done all we can do to keep our schools safe and provide accommodations to all of our learners, I would argue that the reasonable, the responsible the RIGHT thing to do, would be to wait.

Upon first learning about the introduction of a pre-primary program, I sat down and expressed my concerns in an essay I ultimately submitted to the Local Xpress, the former media publication run by the striking Herald reporters. I used the metaphor that introducing pre-primary at this point in time was akin to renovating your house while the roof was on fire.

Unfortunately, I've learned this metaphor has gone through several iterations and become sadly watered down, but I was struck when the Minister of Education referred to it in the debate on pre-primary in the Legislature.

The Minister stated, "If we are to accept the analogy of our education system being a home and being on fire...I would argue, in fact, that early learning is the foundation of our education system."

I sat with this for a while, unsure as to why it bothered me so much.

Just as an introduction doesn't provide the context for a book, early education can't serve as the underpinning of an entire education system.

Edmund Burke, an Irish Statesman and political theorist, is remembered as saying, "Good order is the foundation of all good things."

The order within our overarching education system is established by the choices we make, and those choices directly impact the fate of each and every one of our student learners.

And this government made a choice to invest over \$50 million dollars into onboarding four year old Nova Scotians into a system that is irrevocably broken.



In response to the Commission's initial recommendations, Minister Churchill said he has "full confidence" that the provincial government will "find the money" to implement the final report's recommendations.

I think I speak for many families this evening in saying that I hope this will be true. However the introduction of pre-primary before we had solved the existing issues in P-12 makes these words seem hollow.

You can suggest that one choice doesn't impact the other, but this is a government who has led with austerity. The choice to invest such a significant amount of money was made over investing in other areas.

We know this to be true because lining the shelves of government offices are multiple reports whose recommendations have yet to be fully acted upon.

Minister's Review of Services for Students with Special Needs, delivered in 2007.

The Autism Management Advisory Team Report on Lifespan Needs for Persons  
**Known as AMAT**  
with Autism Spectrum Disorder, delivered in 2010.

The Autism Spectrum Disorder Action Plan, delivered in 2011.

**And the first, and only, Report card on the Action Plan in 2012**  
Choosing Now, Investing in Nova Scotians Living with Autism, delivered to

government in 2016.



This report  
card was  
summed to be

Mr. Chairman, no family wants to put private information into the public forum; it is literally the last resort. It's the choice you make when you are staring at the ceiling at 3am, realizing that the days, months and years are passing quickly and these fleeting moments also take bit by bit the potential you see so clearly in your child. So you fight. You fight for the child that depends on you and your ability to provide for them.

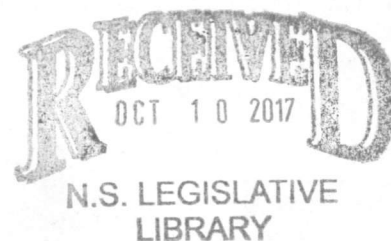
I worry often that our family's advocacy paints a dismal picture of the reality of living with a child who has a disability. Tonight, I'd like to take the opportunity to set that straight.

We are not fighting because our son's life is a burden on us; it's the opposite. We're fighting because we have so much optimism and hope.

Shortly after my son was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, I was speaking with a good friend whose son has Down Syndrome. The words she shared with me that day have stayed with me ever since, and have since come to fruition.

Hello everyone, and thank you for this opportunity to speak today. My name is Carly Sutherland, and I am a learning centre teacher with the Halifax Regional School Board. I know the system well from the inside, however, I speak to you today as a parent, on the outside. My son has what would be classified as severe autism. He is nine years old and has almost no functional communication, no self-regulation skills, and no concept of safety. He is in the midst of a mental health crisis that just last week landed us in the emergency room at the IWK, as he had become so stressed and violent that he posed a serious safety risk to himself and to staff at his school. When we brought him to emergency, some small medication adjustments were made, and we were told that our options were to admit him to the child and adolescent psychiatric ward, which last Thursday had 12 beds for 17 children, or bring him home and send him to school the next day. The next intake for day treatment isn't until March 2018, but it doesn't matter anyway, because we were told his functioning at this time does not make him a good candidate for the program. So, he went back to school on Friday, where he spends the majority of his days in a padded room, his brain overwhelmed by sensory input in an overcrowded school of 700 children, so overcrowded there is not one class under cap, just for the safety of himself and those around him. This is inclusion. My son is mostly safe, he is loved dearly by the staff and specialists who work with him, but they have no more resources left to give.

After the labour strife of last year, I was cautiously optimistic to hear that a commission was assembled to tackle these and other complicated and difficult issues in inclusive education. I was and am hopeful that options will be explored for children like my own, and many others like him, who in order to be truly included, need alternatives. While we await the more detailed recommendations of the commission, they have already made one thing abundantly clear: the



system needs a major overhaul. Yet, in the midst of all this, the liberal government has decided to invest 50 million dollars in a pre-primary program. Why now? I am baffled.

The government claims this program will be inclusive, yet, there is no clear outlined strategy in place to make this happen, other than saying EIBI will remain available to children who have already been diagnosed with autism and have their spot come up on the waitlist. What about the children who have yet to be identified? What about children with a range of other complex needs? How will two early childhood educators, who may or may not have specialized training in working with exceptional children, manage when one child of the twenty-five who show up requires 1:1 support, without any previous warning or documentation? And as an elementary learning centre teacher, I can guarantee that this is going to happen. Will the other teacher be responsible for 24 children? *Will there be a padded room here?* What about when that identified child moves on to Primary the next year, with social-emotional, learning, and behavioural issues noted, and there is no teaching assistant available to support him, because the school is already overwhelmed with needs and student services has no more TAs to give? My son's school is currently allocated 7.8 EPAs and 3 1.0 FT learning centre teachers for 39 children. They have been told there are no more EPAs in the system.

Let me just say that I am an advocate of early intervention and I think the pre-primary program has merit. I have seen the benefits first hand, both in my teaching practice and as a parent. But there are pre-existing programs in this province that families are waiting months to years before accessing direct services. The Progress Centre for Early Intervention, Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention, Nova Scotia Hearing and Speech, specialized day cares like the Child Study Centre at Mount Saint Vincent University: these and other resources are already struggling

to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children. Spending 50 million on a new program that is thrown together in a few months without proper consultation and review, has no discernible plan for supporting vulnerable children, and leaving pre-existing facilities holding yard sales to fund basic supplies and struggling to find qualified staff, seems haphazard at best and irresponsible at worst.

*To use the words of my friend Allison Gardy.*

The Liberals have decided to build a roof when their house is burning down. My hope is that some of you go home tonight and think of my son, along with the hundreds, if not thousands others, who are living in that house.

Thank you.

Carly Sutherland  
October 6th, 2017



N.S. LEGISLATIVE

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to express my concerns. I want to start out by apologizing; as Tim Hausen mentioned this afternoon this chance to speak had only been extended a mere 29 hours before the law amendments committee was set to meet, therefore, I have not had adequate time to prepare. Minister Churchill's response of not feeling the need to consult with parents, residents, or affected parties, and citing the election results as reasoning was hurtful. When voting in an election we are essentially omnibussing a plethora of platform issues – and silencing folks on individual policy stances is overconfident and contemptful in itself.

I went back to university when I became a parent. I realized that I was bringing a child into this world and I wanted to equip myself with the best possible education and recommendations to raise him to the very best of my ability.

A recent Freedom of Information request showed that there was no correspondence with centers, parents, or teachers were in place prior to the introduction and rollout of the program. This is problematic in itself because perhaps if consultation had happened, many of these concerns could have been addressed – or avoided prior to the rollout of this program. If we can't rely on the government to research and take care of our most vulnerable best interests. Who do we look too?

- o My issues surrounding the program are as follows:
  - o **Flexibility.** Whereas 80% of Nova Scotian families are working families; framing this program as a step towards a universal option is problematic taking into account the hours in which the program will be offered. This disadvantages parents who will still be in charge of finding space in excel, or after school programs. These additional programs could not only cost upwards of \$5000, but already have limited space and inadequate resources to deal with a new demographic of 4 year old students. Framing this as a "free" program fails to consider the additional steps and costs to any persons employed in this province.
  - o **Demographic.** Current use in early childhood education centers is not reflective of demand. If you can't afford childcare, you are not likely to use it. If it becomes free, lots of parents would likely make different choices. Out of the 9000 4 year olds in the province, 5000 belong to working parents – this likely does not include students. This program is catering to less than half of the eligible population.
  - o **Ratios.** In the Nova Scotia daycare regulations, preschoolers have a 1:8 ratio. Why does the government think they don't have to adhere to these rules; creating a program with significantly less infrastructure in place to accommodate these children?
  - o **Infrastructure.** The current school system we have in Nova Scotia is not equipped to handle 4 year olds. They will not have access to bathrooms in the classrooms



- (which leaves an even more absurd ratio when teachers have to leave the room to escort children to the washrooms, or do we expect them to wander the halls alone?).
  - The playground spaces were not developed for children of this age; therefore raising safety concerns around the structures.
  - The yards in our currently operating schools are not fenced in.
- **Accessibility.** 4 year olds are not able to ride public transportation and outside of the HRM, locations are inaccessible to many. Not to mention with the pickup and drop off hours, this limits folks who are able to use the program in general.
- **Staffing.** This program is being placed into an already overburdened system. We just faced it's first province wide teachers strike this year. Adding a new demographic to these institutions will do nothing but increase the workload of staff, administration, resource staff, and the like.
- **Current Early Childhood Educators.** The implementation of this program undermines the early childhood education sector in this province that maintains a reputation for providing exceptional care to our children. This sector is already struggling with underfunding and inadequate wages. Losing an entire demographic that they are trained to handle to a newly developed, inadequate program is upsetting.

I think we can collectively agree that significant investment needs to be made into our early childhood education sector; however, I think we can also agree this is a step in the wrong direction. A step that disproportionately disadvantages an entire demographic that could utilize a program of this caliber.

With the lack of developmentally appropriate practice and research being followed, this program does not benefit children.

With the lack of flexibility and accessibility, this program does not benefit parents.

This program will place an additional financial burden and strain on the Early Childhood Education sector losing an entire demographic on short notice, therefore, this program does not benefit our ECE's or centers.

The increased workload to the already struggling education sector as a whole shows us, this program does not benefit teachers.

If we can agree this program does not benefit any of the folks directly affected by it, who are we benefitting? The lack of consultation and consideration for the prior leaves me wondering who is looking out for the best interests of our children, our workers, and working parents in this province.

If we want to provide accessible, free, and universal pre-primary services in our province – we should be looking to the infrastructure we already have in place. Increase funding to the Early Childhood institutions we have. The institutions with the relevant resources, training, education and research in place to properly care for this demographic.

I appreciate being provided the space to address my concerns to you folks; however, I can't help but wonder, if these spaces were provided previously – how many of the mentioned concerns could have been addressed prior to implementation.

In Nova Scotia, 25% of children arrive at school vulnerable in at least one developmental domain. It is known, when children start behind, they often don't catch up. This is an issue that needs meaningful planning, and universal access – not a band aid solution accessible for few.

I strive to consult experts, research, and data in my day to day life to better equip myself to parent to the best of my ability – I feel I should be able to expect the government to do the same when it comes to our children, our residents, and our workers. When experts are telling you that a program is problematic, is not a time for defense. It's a time to listen.

What Nova Scotia needs is, quality, affordable, flexible, inclusive, accessible and well researched childcare options. This program is none of those things.





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CANADIAN CENTRE  
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
NOVA SCOTIA OFFICE

**Written Submission in response to Bill 8: An Act to Amend Chapter 44 of the Acts of 2005, the Pre-primary Education Act, to the Law Amendments Committee, October 4, 2017**

The amendments being proposed to allow for the government to roll-out the pre-primary programs across the province are too wide-open. There is clear evidence that continuing to subsidize for-profit child care is not supporting our families and our children in the ways that they need it. The government needs to stop subsidizing for-profit providers who charge on average 21% higher fees than non-profits. All current centres should be offered the opportunity to become public centres if they wish to receive public funding. The profit motive should be taken off the table in early learning and child care.

The sudden child care closure on a Friday afternoon of a for-profit child care centre left parents scrambling to figure out what to do come Monday morning (given that it offered services for 92 children, this affected a lot of families). The owner had been trying to sell the business for a while. **Child care should not be for sale.** Families deserve a reliable system of quality child care where they are not having to trade-off the kind of quality care they want, provided by qualified staff earning a decent living wage, at a cost they can afford in the community they live or work in.

We applaud you for following the evidence that universal early learning and child care programs are the best way forward. Targeted programs are inefficient and create stigma for users whereas universal programs bring together everyone in the community and can build connections across income levels, cultural groups, and family types. This investment is long overdue.

We are disappointed however that the way the current program is rolling out means that working families are scrambling to figure out child care before and after school and during any in-service days, March break, summer holidays, etc. The cost to cover the actual care hours needed for parents in the workforce (80% of families in Nova Scotia) will still be upwards of \$5,000, cutting in half the government's estimate of what families would save as a result of this program announcement.

Current non-profit providers are struggling to deliver infant and toddler care, which is more expensive because it requires more educators per class than for preschoolers. Families who need care for children under 18 months cannot find it—in Halifax only 9% of regulated spaces are for infants, and toddler and preschool spaces make up 34% and 57% respectively. The government can begin building a system to grandparent in current centres and expand what is available for those under the age of 4 in a range of locations and settings.



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NOVA SCOTIA OFFICE



We are glad that the government is acting on the evidence about the developmental benefits of early learning and child care. However, school readiness is an important consideration, but not the only one. A well-designed early learning and child care system supports families in all the ways they need it.

The province's last child care review, identified infant and rural access gaps as dire. Those should be a priority.

Adequate governance and accountability measures must be in place. The government has said that school boards will decide wages, but won't actually govern these programs. So, although programs will be in schools and subject to the school's health and safety regulations, they will not be administered by principals. What does this mean for working conditions? Currently, child care centres have directors and the non-profits have boards that provide parents with some accountability. Is appointing a lead educator sufficient to ensure accountability in this new model? Who will do the appointing? These are a critical piece of rolling out a legislative framework.

This pre-primary program needs to be part of a plan to build a quality, evidence-based, universal early learning and child care system. To do so would require ending the patchwork of programs, including the inadequate subsidy program for families (one of the lowest in the country). The government needs to roll the various funding into one envelope out of which a comprehensive system could be systematically built. Without this, parents will still be left scrambling to find child care, no matter the age of their children, let alone care they can afford with (median) fees of \$900 per month.

We need a funded transition plan, created in collaboration with researchers, early childhood educators, and parents, to develop a full system for all children in Nova Scotia. This plan must include a workforce strategy that deals with the currently inequitable compensation and working conditions, as well as funding to support infant and toddler care. Without dedicated funding for a transition plan, providers will struggle to recruit and retain staff, raising the very possible risk that parents will lose access to care for those under the age of four and wrap around care for school-aged (before, after-school, summer).

Submitted by Christine Saulnier and Tammy Findlay

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