

Bill 13 – An Act to Amend Chapter 1 of the Acts of 1995-96, the Education Act

**Presentation to Law Amendments Committee
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(Good afternoon; and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about this legislation that is before you.)

My name is Karen Reinhardt. I live in a small, very rural community about 20 km southwest of the Town of Bridgewater. I have lived in that area of the province for over 40 years, and saw my two children move successfully through the public school program. For several of those years, I was a school bus driver for the local school board. In fact, I was the first female school bus driver in their history. At that time, it was a very challenging job to gain acceptance by my colleagues.

More recently, up until it was “fired” by the Minister of Education in November 2011, I was serving my third term as an elected member of the South Shore Regional School Board. During my tenure, I served on all of the standing committees (Education, Human Resources and Finance and Operations, acting in some cases as chair/vice chair of some of those committees. Through those years, I also served on many of the ad hoc and other committees of the board. As did all of my colleagues, I took my role very seriously. I was an active, involved and informed board member, and feel that my contributions to the board were beneficial to the group as a whole, as well as to the students and families that elected me to that position.

Despite the fact that I am no longer a board member, I remain actively interested in education issues, in particular their connection with students and communities that are contained not only within the South Shore Regional School Board boundaries, but

throughout the province of Nova Scotia. I strive to remain active in working through the many and varied education issues that face us.

Given my experience, as a parent, as a former board employee, and as an active member of my community, I feel that I have a reasonable perspective on the issue at hand. And, speaking as an active, involved and informed former board member, I feel that I can legitimately address the issue that we have before us today,

I am here today to speak to this amendment to the Education Act, which will reduce the statutory minimum number of school board members from eight (8) to five (5). It is my hope that as you listen to my remarks, you will give consideration to the changes that I will respectfully propose at the end of my presentation.

School boards are comprised of a varied group of elected lay people, who bring a range of skills, experience, knowledge, values, beliefs and opinions to their role. Their background does not necessarily include teaching, administration, or any other aspect of education.

It is this wide diversity that ensures that board processes are truly democratic, and which contributes to good decision-making. It also helps the board, through its diverse membership, to provide a balance between the interests of the broader community and the interests of those involved in the delivery of education. I'm sure that we can all agree that these interests may not always appear to be the same.

I believe that, among other things, it is this valuable diversity, and valuable range of skills, experience, values and opinions that is being threatened by this amendment, and I thank you for this opportunity to refute some of the assumptions that it brings forward.

The Minister's comments regarding this bill state that this amendment will give our school boards more flexibility in finding further efficiencies in their work. Did the boards ask for this flexibility?

The Minister is not clear as to what efficiencies she is referring, but there are two areas where this amendment clearly falls short of this goal. I will use a specific case, the South Shore Regional School Board (SSRSB), to illustrate these shortcomings. But please bear in mind that, going forward, these concerns are not limited to a single board.

In terms of financial "efficiency", which seems to be the over-riding concern today, the reduction of four (4) board members would result in a savings of approximately \$55,000. The 2012-2013 budget of the SSRSB is roughly \$7.6 million dollars (\$7,622,483.00). In this case, the reduction of four members could not be considered a very significant saving. Especially when compared to the loss of valuable "heads around the table" that foster good decision-making.

In terms of bureaucratic "efficiency", which also seems to be an over-riding concern of the department, the loss of four SSRSB board members will do nothing to reduce a possibly bloated bureaucracy. The bureaucracy is not at the board table. The current configuration of the SSRSB is twelve (12) members. Its administrative bureaucracy consists of a 50% FTE secretary.

Mention has been made that this will also increase the flexibility of the UaRB in its mandate to make decisions about the possible number of members within any given school board. Did the UaRB ask for this flexibility?

Sadly, using the same SSRSB as an example, it would appear that the UaRB has been asked to rule on an illegal future size of the SSRSB board. A cynical person might think that this could be the reason that this amendment is before you today. The cart was put before the horse in this case, and the Minister and the Department are trying to assist in legitimizing that timing problem by scrambling to remedy it through their own cynical use of the legislative process.

Neither the school boards in this province, nor the Utilities and Review Board asked for, or indicated a need for, these "flexibilities".

The Minister further states that this bill will not force school boards reduce the numbers of their members. I myself believe that this is true. To my knowledge, no other boards in the province are contemplating a reduction in their numbers in the near future.

True or not, this amendment is perceived to be aimed squarely at a single board, the SSRSB, as a cynical attempt to remedy the ill-timed request of its own one-person, government-appointed "board". A very poor use of taxpayer trust.

In most cases, board members struggle to perform their civic duty within boards that have very large budgets. They come to these positions from a wide variety of backgrounds and occupations and often do not have a lot of familiarity with the topics with which they must deal.

For that reason, they must rely on the advice of senior school board staff and, in particular, the Superintendent. Unfortunately, this reliance can, and often does, lead to elected officials being manipulated, and/or having to depend upon, less than reliable information. Having fewer elected members on a school board will not create a more efficient board, but will leave fewer minds and voices to challenge the information they are fed.

In order that school boards not be seen as simply impotent tools of the Superintendent and senior staff, or the Department of Education, it is important that there be a critical mass of minds and voices to discuss, debate and challenge the information provided, to ensure an abundance of viewpoints and ideas, to ensure decisions are well made.

I urge you to give serious consideration to the following **three alternatives to the immediate passage of Bill 13** – alternatives that will give you, as legislators, an opportunity not only to retrieve the situation from its widely perceived cynical presentation as a quick and dirty solution to a timing problem with a targeted board, but to give yourselves a solid, considered basis to amend the Act in a reasonable, informed manner.

1. **Consider a wider, altogether different tack, with these much needed reviews:**
 - a. For the moment, leave the provisions of the Education Act with respect to school board size as they are. They can be brought to the table again, at a later date if necessary;
 - b. Immediately initiate a review of the Act with respect to how school boards are structured and how they operate;
 - c. Immediately review the flawed provisions and procedures for school review;
 - d. Consider placing a moratorium on school closings until the above review is completed (as was done in the recent past).
2. **Postpone its passage.** There was **NO** previous consultation with school boards in the province, nor with the NSSBA, regarding this amendment before its introduction in the House. Postpone the bill until such time as consultation with these bodies, and possibly the public, can take place (Why is it so important to do force it through so quickly? Is the purpose to reduce one board, the South Shore Regional School Board, to a point where it will become ineffective?);
3. **Lower the maximum number of school board members (currently 18).** If the amendment is indeed intended to create some sort of (illogical) “efficiencies” related to the size of a school board in this province, it only makes sense to look at both ends of the range, instead of just the minimum (which in this case is perceived to apply only to, and specifically to, a single board);

I hope that you will give serious consideration to the alternatives presented here. Everyone in our province has a stake in the education of our children, and all of us are hoping that you will give considered, deliberate thought to the message you are sending to your constituents, and to what your actions mean to real people.

Thank you for your time and attention today, and the opportunity to speak to you about this important issue.