



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 ^{issues} was to dispute the gross misrepresentation of the ~~concerns~~ being raised about pre-primary – suggesting that if you

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
6 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
summarized 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.