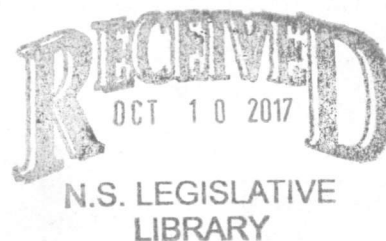


Hello everyone, and thank you for this opportunity to speak today. My name is Carly Sutherland, and I am a learning centre teacher with the Halifax Regional School Board. I know the system well from the inside, however, I speak to you today as a parent, on the outside. My son has what would be classified 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