

Press Statement
by Kevin Foley, President
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(please check against delivery)

Good Morning,

High School Teachers' Perceptions of Their Working Environment in Newfoundland: A Grounded Theory Study delves into workplace stress which has been found to diminish teachers' enthusiasm, leaving them feeling overworked, unsupported and burnt out.

It is not my intent to review the full study. Dr. Younghusband has already provided an overview of many of the most important results. You also have a copy of her presentation and summary highlights of her thesis.

This study reiterates what we have been stating for many years. Teachers do not feel that they have an equal partnership in education; they feel overworked and unsupported. They report being excluded from the decision-making process and they want some autonomy. Teacher stress and resulting burnout are serious problems that must be addressed if the quality and productivity of education is not to be weakened and if the health and well-being of teachers is to be taken seriously.

As I read Dr. Younghusband's thesis and listened to her presentation this morning, my feeling is that of anger. I had the same reaction last year when I read Dr. David Dibbon's study on teacher workload. Why anger? Because both studies have put a human face to what I knew was occurring to so many of our teachers – and because it is happening and nobody seems to be listening.

The Department of Education and the School Boards certainly do not appear to be listening. We have told both groups that there are too many initiatives coming at teachers at once and that there is no gatekeeper. Nobody is screening the new initiatives. It can be compared to bringing new furniture into your home without getting rid of the old. Things are too cluttered and, as a result, children are not properly served and teachers are overworked.

Dr. Dibbon's report was presented to the world at a news conference last year and again to the Department and the School Boards Association. He pointed out how each new task assigned to teachers gets added on to their already busy schedule and, as a result, the workload of teachers becomes intensified. Teachers, because of their conscientiousness, take each new task seriously and take things to heart when they can't keep up. It was Dr. Dibbon who again alerted us to the fact that the frustration and stress levels of teachers at school were impacting the family lives of teachers and that new teachers were leaving at an alarming rate. Teachers again expressed concern that their own workload was affecting students.

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It is Dr. Younghusband who points out to us the impact these conditions are having on the everyday personal lives of teachers. It is not a pretty picture. This is not a phenomenon that is impacting just a few teachers; this phenomenon is widespread and is impacting thousands of our teachers. Teachers talk about being set up to fail and how this contributes to fatigue and frustration and the hurt that goes with being perceived as a failure.

In my mind there is a lack of understanding of the realities of classroom life. Without that understanding, disrespect soon follows. This disrespect can show itself in many ways. It shows itself when it is assumed that it is all right for teachers to travel long distances on school buses with pets and luggage and children to attend PD workshops. It shows itself when concerted efforts are made to change parent-teacher conferences away from the traditional day sessions to evening sessions even when it is clearly shown that teachers are already investing large amounts of their time outside the school day on class preparation activities. It shows itself when teachers are assigned two or three new courses to teach in a new school year. It shows itself when you bring in new initiatives without getting rid of the old. It shows itself when the views and opinions of teachers are not listened to. It shows itself when teachers are not supported in their dealings with problem students and when repairs are not made to damaged property in a timely manner. It shows itself when a workshop for a course is not provided until nine months after a course has been introduced. It shows itself when textbooks aren't provided until months after a course has begun (if then). It shows itself when teachers are forced to take sick leave to attend to serious personal family matters. And the list goes on and on.

We must find ways to implement solutions that are sensible, timely, and meaningful, and we must do it now. It is time for a true understanding of the reality of classroom life and with it the respect and support that teachers deserve.

Thank you.