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Director,

Below is a document we received from a senior teacher with the Thames Valley District School Board. While it is deeply personal, it reflects what many teachers feel and experience every day.

I am forwarding this to you for consideration as we continue to address unacceptable levels of violence in our elementary schools.

I would like to preface all of my subsequent comments by saying that these words come from two places that are very important in my life. Number one, I speak from a place of love that I possess for my profession. After almost three decades in education, I feel strongly that I possess a legitimate and valid perspective on the opinions that I am going to share. More importantly, however, I speak from a parent's perspective. There are no two more vital roles in this world than being a parent to your own child but to also be the 'parent'/role model/leader etc. for the children in our care for ten months of their lives. The convoluted policy of 'Progressive Discipline' is failing our children. The ambiguity is slowly undermining our effort as educators to create environments where children and young adults can flourish.

Some will say that these words are far too cynical, that they are a result of a disgruntled employee who cannot wait to leave the profession and is just biding his time. I can live with those that will label me as such. However, those that know me well will differ. These opinions could not be any further from the truth. I could easily 'ride' out my final years in teaching, however, that would be the easy way out and it is not in my nature. When I step away from this profession, I hope I will not leave it in its current state. Our children deserve better.

All children, regardless of their age, thrive in environments of love (and sometimes 'tough' love), structure, rule parameters and the consistent enforcement of said rules and boundaries. Walk into any classroom in the world and witness when the enforcement of simple rules are not followed in a clear and consistent manner, and you will find a modicum of anarchy. This creates a cauldron of mistrust in the eyes of many of our children and their parents; both will continue to look at the educational system with cynicism and mistrust. These conditions are ripe for the establishment of an unsafe and unwelcoming place where the opposite should be. Our children must be immersed in environments where simple rules are followed and enforced. Children should feel safe coming to school knowing that these simple rules apply to all. Only then can true learning take place. Only then will all of our children thrive.

In 2022, many of our children are confused. It is easy to blame this on the recent worldwide pandemic. However, this is far too simplistic and, in a way, is capitulating to the invisible enemy that has plagued our world these past two plus years. Scapegoating is a coward's way of neglecting reality. As educators, we strive to establish a positive growth mindset in all of our children. In many ways, progressive discipline undermines this goal. Recently, I have listened to those in administrative roles who failed to take full responsibility when schools become unsafe.

Within the past month, a member of the TVDSB's senior administration team was being interviewed on the radio program 'CBC London Morning'. The crux of the interview surrounded the escalating amount of violence at a secondary school in London. This includes teachers being threatened by their own students with violence in the school parking lot at the conclusion of the day. During the interview, the superintendent said this, 'Statistics show that the incidences that have occurred at this particular school are no different than some of the other schools in the district and across the entire province.'

I initially paused and asked myself, did I hear what I thought I heard? I backed it up and listened intently. Those were the exact words used. As an educator, I was stunned to hear this. But as a parent, I was absolutely shocked to hear someone in a senior leadership role admit to thousands and thousands of listeners that what is occurring in our schools is becoming normalized. If this type of delinquent behavior is being passed off as somewhat normal, then we are doomed. Our children deserve to thrive in environments where this is not normal.

Our/My employer will inevitably refute some of these opinions by citing statistics that show a recent reduction in suspension rates as proof to the community that schools are safer. However, this narrative is false, and a negative correlation exists. Violence, verbal assaults (towards peers and teachers) and 'bullying' continue to be on the rise. In my opinion, the statistics are being manipulated. Unfortunately, it falls upon the teacher to solve many of the problems associated with unsafe conditions in our classrooms. It is becoming more and more redundant to seek assistance from the administrators in the building because they too, are not getting the support they need from their superiors. If senior administration fails to take action in any workplace, then the system will unravel; this is what is transpiring in ours.

It is only my opinion, but I truly believe that I speak on behalf of thousands of my colleagues across the province. I also truly believe that I speak on behalf of most parents in all walks of life. Our children deserve better.

I have heard time and time again that we must do what is in the best interests of our children. I do not dispute that, and I am confident that the overwhelming majority of my colleagues will concur. However, I feel strongly that the children in our care have been granted far too much empowerment. As teachers, we must strike a fine balance between being the person who holds the proverbial 'buck' and one who allows the children in his/her care to feel that their voice is being heard in this confusing world. It is far from natural when a child or young adult feels like they are the one in charge. This is what is happening in our schools. More and more, children are confused. And more and more, we are doing them a massive disservice.

My greatest fear is coming to fruition. I watch closely. The vast majority of 'our' children come to school, follow the simple rules put forth by the teacher, laugh, learn and become what I consider, future upstanding members of society. Those children are becoming more and more jaded. Through classroom discussions and one on one interaction with some of my students, I have been told numerous times that some feel that their voice is not being heard, and that the transgressors rights seem to be more important than their own. Kids are observant and they are very astute when it comes to justice. We teach our children to speak up when they feel that they have been wronged and where society can improve. It is what makes our job so vital. However, what continues to transpire is a slippery slope. We cannot lose these children. We cannot condone what continues to perseverate in many of our schools.

Although it may sound like a hyperbole, we only must look at the situation in school's all across the United States. I am sure there was a time in the not-so- distant past when seven- and eight-year-olds did not have to participate in 'active shooter' safety drills in their classrooms. I am sure there was a time in the not-so-distant past when high school students did not have to pass through metal detectors as they crossed the threshold of the place in their world that should be safe and secure. Am I far too naïve to suggest that we are immune to these possibilities in our schools?

However, if we do not reverse the ambiguous policy of Progressive Discipline or at least are transparent about what it actually entails, then who knows? If children and young adults are not held accountable for their actions, then human nature suggests that they will 'push the envelope' so to speak. If one can get away with going 120 kph on a highway, then logic dictates that maybe 125 kph is the norm. The same logic applies to children. If a child or young adult can violently assault someone on the schoolyard at recess or even in a classroom (which continues to happen in our schools on a daily basis) and there are few if any consequences, then this becomes the norm. If a child can tell a teacher to 'fuck off' and the system chalks this up to the student simply having a bad day, then this becomes the norm. If a teenager feels they possess the hubris to threaten violence towards a teacher and no one holds them accountable, then this becomes the norm. The cycle perpetuates itself and the problem festers even more.

All of our children deserve better. This includes the children that transgress. They need our support. However, by turning away from the problem, we are doing those young, impressionable minds a massive disservice. This is not congruent with what they will experience in the real world. Schools are but a microcosm of what is and what will happen in society. This is a daunting but valid reality.

As educators, we are being laughed at; maybe not to our face but trust me, we are being laughed at. The trust society has in its schools continues to erode and that saddens me greatly. Parents become more and more cynical when their children tell them at the dinner table about what happened in the classroom and on the yard. Ultimately, both parties will continue to harbor feelings of mistrust towards their classroom teachers because we are the 'face' of the system. That is unfair but sadly, it is reality.

So, who is ultimately to blame? I for one, am tired of teachers being cast as the culprit. We can only spread peanut butter so far. I think I speak on behalf of thousands of my colleagues when I say that this is metaphor for how we are feeling in 2022. We can only do so much. If we do not have the backing of our administrators or others in decision-making roles, then the morale in our schools will continue to deteriorate. Kids and their parents will continue on this slippery slope of cynicism towards the entire system. This is not fair and I for one, am fed up with being scapegoated because my superiors neglect to take action to ensure that my classroom and thousands of classrooms across this province are a safe, welcoming haven for my students and my daughter.

If the Ministry of Education and senior leadership in our publicly funded boards of education continue to abdicate their responsibility to hold ALL of our children accountable and thereby creating unsafe and unwelcome classrooms, then violent acts and disrespect in our schools will continue to escalate. Teachers and other innocent children will continue to be verbally or even physically harassed. Our society deserves better.

I am calling on my respected colleagues to assist me in demanding change. As educators and as parents, we are well within our rights to advocate for our children and assist in being part of the solution towards positive change within a system that is so vital in all of our lives. Please assist me by considering attaching your signature and your place of work to this letter.

I truly believe in this instance, as a collective, our voice is stronger.

Sincerely,



Craig Smith

President, ETFO Thames Valley Teacher Local

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Local Released Officers

Terry Card, President, ETFO Thames Valley Occasional Teacher Local

Lori-Ann Pizzolato, Chair, TVDSB Board of Trustees