



Standing Committees

March 4th, 2006

The High School Drop Out Rate and the Safe Schools Act: A Panel Discussion

with

Liz Sandals, MPP Guelph-Wellington, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services, and responsible for the Safe Schools Act Review. Ms. Sandals presently serves on the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and the Education Policy Cabinet.

Ms. Sandals received a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Guelph and a Master of Mathematics from the University of Waterloo. She served as vice-chair and chair of her local school board and was elected president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association from 1998 to 2002. She also sat on the board of directors of the Canadian School Boards Association as Ontario's representative.

Selwyn Pieters, lawyer, graduate of U of T and Osgoode Law School. He is a member of the Ontario Bar and has a law practice on Adelaide Street. He specializes in education law, working with parents and students in the area of human rights, safe schools, suspensions and expulsions.

Mr. Pieters has worked as a refugee protection officer for the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada and as court room registrar at the Ministry of the Attorney General. He financed his education by working at Eaton's as a security attendant. Mr. Pieters has been a member of the Academic Board of the University of Toronto and is a member of many professional and community Associations.

The morning discussion:

The Safe Schools Act was introduced in 2000 to impose a Zero Tolerance policy in Ontario schools. It established province-wide standards that removed any degree of flexibility or individual school autonomy in matters of discipline: students must be suspended or expelled for behaviour that can be seen to threaten others. (Suspensions can be appealed to the school trustees, but by the time the appeal reaches them, the suspension is usually over.) Rates of suspensions rose 34% from 1999 to 2004; rates of expulsion rose 1700% in the same period.

Mr. Pieters is dead-set against the Act, and feels it should be repealed. He sees the policy as being unfair to disadvantaged and marginalized students, including immigrants, Blacks, and students with disabilities, especially learning disabilities, whose other problems may exacerbate their school behaviour and lead them into trouble. As these students' hope for any kind of future rests with their acquiring an education, it is seen as beneficial to keep them in school: removing

them, even temporarily, leads to their dropping out altogether, a trend that he connects with street violence.

Liz Sandals is the only politician on the Safe Schools Action Team, appointed by Education Minister Gerard Kennedy to address safety in schools and review the Safe Schools Act. She claims the Safe Schools Act is the "worst communicated Act ever", and that attention focused on the zero tolerance aspect ignores the fact that extenuating circumstances may be taken into account in considering suspension or expulsion. Furthermore, the Act deals with other problems, particularly bullying, which can lead to students dropping out, and offers Boards of Education methods of combating them. She acknowledges difficulties:

Boards, faced under the Act with the necessity to expel a student, may use "limited" expulsion, which does not require referral to another program, rather than "permanent" expulsion, which requires referral to an alternative;

Police must be notified if the offence is potentially criminal: if student not charged, he may think his behaviour is acceptable.

Ms. Sandals agreed with Mr. Pieters that the drop-out rate has increased since the Act was introduced, but blamed other factors, notably the new curriculum. She pointed to the *Learning to 18 Program*, which keeps kids "learning", not necessarily in school, and the need to increase access to apprenticeship programs and other alternative routes to graduation.

Marianne Singh-Waraich, Ontario Council Education Chair, reminded us that CFUW has made a submission on the *Safe Schools Act*: it agrees with the broad principles of the act, especially the sections against bullying, as long as all children continue to receive appropriate quality education and/or treatment of their problems.

A link to the Ontario Council submission on the *Safe Schools Act* can be found on the "What's New" page dated Jan.31st, 2006 at <http://www.cfuwontcouncil.ca/WhatsNew.html>

Peggy Pinkerton