



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Truro, NS

Day 3

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EVIDENCE

Witness 10: Katrina Burns

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[00:00:00]

Ches Crosbie

Katrina Burns, do you affirm that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Thank you.

Katrina Burns

I do.

Ches Crosbie

Thank you.

Alison Steeves

Can you please tell us your full name, where you're from, and your occupation?

Katrina Burns

My name is Katrina Burns and I'm from Truro, Nova Scotia and I'm a substitute teacher.

Alison Steeves

And how long have you been a teacher?

Katrina Burns

I've been a teacher for about seven years now.

Alison Steeves

Has that been in the public system?

Katrina Burns

No, I originally started out in the private school sector and then moved into Halifax Regional Centre for Education [HRCE] in 2020.

Alison Steeves

Okay, so you did approximately five years in the private system and then you switched to HRCE in— When did you start at HRCE, sorry?

Katrina Burns

I started in September of 2020.

Alison Steeves

Okay, so going back to the pre-pandemic era, sort of late 2019, early 2020: Can you share a bit about what your life was like back then, family, community, et cetera?

Katrina Burns

We were just a basically normal family who had just had our second daughter. I had my second daughter September 22nd of 2019. And we had planned to do— With my first daughter I had gone out. I had done every activity possible, from stroller boot camp to play groups. And then, with the birth of my daughter, obviously then came COVID and we were on lockdown essentially right away.

Alison Steeves

And did you know your neighbours pretty well at that time?

Katrina Burns

Very close with our neighbours, very, very close.

Alison Steeves

And you're in Truro now, but at that time—

Katrina Burns

I was in Hammonds Plains.

Alison Steeves

Hammonds Plains. And how long had you been living in Hammonds Plains?

Katrina Burns

Seven years.

Alison Steeves

In the same community?

Katrina Burns

In the same community.

Alison Steeves

And then you started at HRCE in which month of 2020?

Katrina Burns

Well, it would have been August. This is when the teachers usually go back.

Alison Steeves

And what was it like starting there?

Katrina Burns

So I had gone into the public school system as a substitute. So when they originally started in 2020, they had sectors of places where you were allowed to go to sub. So there was about, I think, 30 schools in my section that I was allowed to sub at. I kept it narrowed down to two schools. And I was lucky enough to get a job every single day at those two schools. But a lot of people had a problem or a difficult time finding employment during the time because of the limitations of where they were able to sub.

Alison Steeves

So over the course of the 2020 school year, you are subbing between two separate schools.

Katrina Burns

Yeah.

Alison Steeves

And you substituted pretty much every day.

Katrina Burns

Yeah.

Alison Steeves

The place that you worked in 2021, did you continue doing that?

Katrina Burns

Yeah. So I ended up falling into a long-term sub position, which was a maternity leave at one of the schools that I was subbing at. And then that's where I had started of September 2021, in a Grade 2/3 class.

Alison Steeves

And you had been subbing there at the same school the year before.

Katrina Burns

Yes.

Alison Steeves

Can you tell us a bit about your class that year in September 2021 and the school you were working?

Katrina Burns

Yes, so I was at a school named Sycamore Elementary in Sackville, and it was a lower income school with a lot of kids who had diverse needs. The class I was getting was a particularly difficult one, with multiple students who had anywhere from behavioural needs to severe learning disabilities.

Alison Steeves

What grade was it?

Katrina Burns

It was a 2/3 split.

Alison Steeves

And so, do you feel that in the course of your time teaching there that you were able to make some progress, build some good rapport with the students in that class?

Katrina Burns

Absolutely. So from day one I started my class similar to another teacher who was actually here, where we would kind of talk to each other about how we were feeling. We weren't able to have any kind of physical contact, but we would be having conversations in the morning about how we're feeling coming into the class; how we're feeling about our day; and kind of what our day would look like so that they were prepared throughout the day for their transitions.

Alison Steeves

And so, you started in 2020. There had already been shutdowns the year before, and so the COVID protocols were sort of in place. We were about six months in, I think, at that time.

Do you recall what sort of COVID measures were implemented in your school?

Katrina Burns

Absolutely. So when I was originally subbing in 2020 and started out, there were many different protocols in the different schools.

[00:05:00]

So some schools went as far to have walkie-talkies, so you could communicate if a child either fell on the playground or needed some assistance. That way, someone from the office would come and escort the child back to the office to kind of be looked at. That way, it would keep kids from transporting through the school so much. And we could keep transmission down throughout the school. There were other schools who almost barely had any kind of protocol. And then Sycamore did have the same kind of protocol where it would be a class going down on one side, another class coming up the other, sanitizing as soon as they came into the classroom, or left or went to the washroom and came back in. Even if they had just washed their hands in the washroom, it was still sanitizer to come back into the classroom.

There was also, if there was any sign of sickness, it was a call up to allow the principal to know so that we could then call their parents to get them to be picked up.

Alison Steeves

Were the kids subject to masking and social distancing?

Katrina Burns

Absolutely. So desks had to be— When I had gone into the 2/3 class, we were allowed at that point to put the desks kind of together, but they had to stay in those groups. There was no travelling around the classroom unless they had the mask over their face. They were able to bring their mask down while they were sitting at their groups. And I did have an area set up in my classroom beside the window for the summer months when it was really, really hot for the kids to go down and pull their mask down so that they could sit and get fresh air in the morning.

Alison Steeves

So based on your personal observation, how did those measures impact the daily life for students and teachers at the school?

Katrina Burns

It was so hard to go in in the morning and see all of these kids with a mask up over their face and struggling to breathe, and struggling to kind of express themselves. It was almost like they had become kind of emotionless to what was happening around them. You had some kids who were so worried about getting COVID and spreading it to family members that they were just panicked as soon as they came in.

You had kids who were also against the mask because, obviously, they had heard their parents talking, and they would fight you on the mask. And it was constant that we would have to remind them to pull their mask up over their face and that they had to follow the rules in school that we were mandated to follow.

Alison Steeves

Would you say that the kids generally kept their masks clean and sterile?

Katrina Burns

No.

Alison Steeves

When the COVID-19 vaccines came out, did you take one?

Katrina Burns

I did not.

Alison Steeves

And why not?

Katrina Burns

I had just felt really off about how fast things were coming out and how much pressure they were putting on people to go get a vaccination. Like, there had never been that much pressure put on any other kind of, like, flu vaccine or anything like that before. So I had not— Like, it just seemed kind of fishy to me that we were pushing people to go do this and even against their will, even when they were asking for exemptions.

Alison Steeves

Did you feel pressure to take the vaccine?

Katrina Burns

Absolutely. There was pressure on all ends: from my family, from family friends, from people at school to just everyone all around me seemed to have kind of— Like, our neighbours as well became people who would just constantly be reminding us like, “Oh, well, you could just go get the vaccination. It’s easy. You could go get it, and then all of this would be over.” So.

Alison Steeves

Did you start noticing any differential treatment on the basis of this decision?

Katrina Burns

I did especially for my six-year-old. We grew up in a community where we all had kids together. And it became part where there were bubbles and my six-year-old daughter would sit in the window and stare out at her friends playing, and she wasn't able to go play with them.

Alison Steeves

Did you notice any differential care in the healthcare system?

Katrina Burns

Yes, so around October of 2021, I had been driving with my husband and I felt a sharp pain just shoot down my left arm. And then it came to a point where I couldn't breathe. And we had to pull over, and I couldn't catch my breath. My heart was pumping from my chest and so we went to emerge. I have a vast history of heart problems, everywhere from heart problems to blood clots to aneurysms in my family, including my father who had his first heart problem at 27 years old. And I'm 33, just for reference.

[00:10:00]

So I had gone in, and once we got to the hospital, there was screening for COVID. And I'm standing there clutching my chest asking to be helped, and the woman went through the protocol and got to the question about whether or not I was a vaccinated individual. And when I said that I wasn't, it was at that point where she proceeded to then stop and tell me that her father-in-law was not vaccinated and was against the vaccination and decided, after she had a long talk with him, that he would go get it. So therefore I should go and get it because I'm just hesitant on the vaccination. As I'm clutching my chest thinking that I'm having a heart attack.

Alison Steeves

In the fall of 2021, when Nova Scotia announced the Nova Scotia COVID-19 mandatory vaccination protocol in high-risk settings, indicating that teachers would be required to have two COVID-19 vaccines, what was that like for you? What were you feeling?

Katrina Burns

At this point, I was incredibly worried for my future. I knew that I wasn't going to get the COVID-19 vaccination, especially after having gone through what I went through at the hospital. It just kind of reconfirmed that it wasn't something for me. If I wasn't going to get the care at that point, if something did happen when I did take the vaccination, I wouldn't have the care at that point either. So at that point, I just felt that I couldn't go through with it.

Alison Steeves

Were you worried about your job?

Katrina Burns

Very much so. But I was also more so worried at that point about the 21 kids who were sitting in a classroom, who also needed to have that constant or consistent support and the constant reassurance from someone in the morning that they were going to be there and be that support for them. Some of these families were children who didn't have the proper support at home or the proper care at home and who needed someone there. And then there were other kids who struggled very much with bullying and were coming back to school and struggling with their reading and their writing and needed that support. So it was these 21 kids who weren't going to have that support from me that I was giving them. And I didn't know whether or not my replacement would give them the same amount of care. So I was worried about losing my job, and financially it obviously put a strain on my life; however, I was more so worried about the 21 kids that I was teaching.

Alison Steeves

Did you attempt to get an exemption from your employer?

Katrina Burns

I did, so I had sent in an email explaining why I felt that I couldn't get the COVID-19 vaccination and I was denied the exemption.

Alison Steeves

Did you provide me with a copy of that response from HRCE?

Katrina Burns

I did, yes.

Alison Steeves

Do you have that in front of you?

Katrina Burns

I do.

Alison Steeves

So it's Exhibit TR-0007b. Do you mind if I read an excerpt from their response?

Katrina Burns

Mm-hmm.

Alison Steeves

"So, after careful consideration, I have concluded that the information provided is not sufficient to support the need for an accommodation. Further, I note that your position as a teacher requires that you interact directly and in close proximity with students. As such,

even if you are entitled to an accommodation, Halifax Regional Centre for Education could not accommodate it without undue hardship.”

So they felt you had insufficient information. And they state that even if you had sufficient information, they would not grant an exemption.

Katrina Burns

Mm-hmm.

Alison Steeves

Did you also inform your employer that you would be willing to wear a mask or test regularly as an alternative to vaccination?

Katrina Burns

Absolutely. So I had gone in every day wearing a mask, even though it was the most horrendous thing to try and teach with a mask on, especially when you're trying to teach kids who are trying to read. And I did tell my employer that I would test every single day if I could keep my position.

Alison Steeves

And what was their response?

Katrina Burns

No.

Alison Steeves

Did you also provide me with a letter of support from one of your students' parents addressed to Tim Houston, Zach Churchill, and Robert Strang, expressing their discontent with the mandates on account that their child was losing you as a teacher?

Katrina Burns

Yes.

Alison Steeves

And you have a copy of that in front of you?

Katrina Burns

I do.

Alison Steeves

So that's Exhibit TR-0007a. And do you mind if I read an excerpt from there?

Katrina Burns

Sure.

Alison Steeves

“To Tim Houston, Zach Churchill and Robert Strang. Today I received notice that my eight-year-old son’s teacher will be removed from her position due to this unethical, unnecessary and illegal vaccine mandate being forced on all Nova Scotians by your government.

[00:15:00]

“I am irate. Katrina Burns is one of the best teachers my child has ever had. She is irreplaceable. Yet you now unwisely and unjustly cause her to have to be replaced.”

Can you tell me a bit about this student?

Katrina Burns

So he was a young boy who had had trouble in previous years with being bullied, and his mom had removed him from school in pre-primary. But then he wanted to go back to school and get to know some of his peers and kind of socialize with peers, so he had decided to come back to school. He had struggled very much with reading and his writing, and, in the short time that I was with him, he made leaps and bounds compared to what he was. And he loved coming to school, which was vastly different from his previous years. So that made all of the difference in the world for him to come in every day and be as happy as he was.

Alison Steeves

Was this the only parent who had expressed support for you at this time?

Katrina Burns

No. So I was made to stay and go through all my parent-teacher interviews, which were all phone interviews at this point, and then afterwards was able to allow parents to know that I would no longer be their child’s teacher. And I had so many parents reaching out to ask, like, “What can we do? Who can we contact?” And given the response that I had received, I said, “Unfortunately, I don’t think there is anything that you can do, but I appreciate very much the support.”

Alison Steeves

Did anything change your employer’s mind?

Katrina Burns

No.

Alison Steeves

So you were placed on unpaid administrative leave.

Katrina Burns

I was.

Alison Steeves

When?

Katrina Burns

For December 1st was the— So November 30th was my last day of work, and December 1st I was completely done.

Alison Steeves

Do you recall when the the vaccination protocol was announced?

Katrina Burns

I feel like it was October 6th that it was announced.

Alison Steeves

So approximately early October, you find out that you're going to be placed on unpaid leave indefinitely, and then you stay in the school and you work there for approximately two more months. What was it like working there during that time, knowing that?

Katrina Burns

So I kind of kept my vaccination status hidden as long as I could, just to avoid any kind of bullying or kind of different treatment from the staff. Again, I worked at a very lovely school for the most part. Everyone was COVID conscious, but they didn't kind of judge me any differently once they found out. So I took the time to kind of let them know myself. The people who were very COVID conscious and were constantly checking numbers and constantly following all protocol to make sure that they didn't get COVID kind of stood back a little bit further from me. But there was never a point where they kind of treated me too much differently. They would just keep their distance.

Alison Steeves

Can you describe what it was like for you to leave school on your last day before your leave?

Katrina Burns

So the last day of work— The last week I was at work, I was asked to train the person who would be taking over for me and to kind of help them with some of the needs that were in the classroom. So I spent the week packing up my classroom, and if anyone is a teacher in here, they know how much stuff teachers accumulate over the time. So I spent that week unpacking my classroom, but still leaving stuff so that there was a bit of normalcy for the kids. And then, come the last day, it was a very emotional thing for especially my classroom because they couldn't fully understand why I was going to have to leave. And they didn't

fully understand why I couldn't just stay and teach them, even though I wasn't vaccinated, because I still followed all of the rules.

Alison Steeves

What impact did this have on your life, this experience?

Katrina Burns

So, my life has drastically changed compared to what I did before. I was very much, I guess, what you could call a rule follower. I didn't go against the grain at all. I thought that I would have this wonderful life where I'd become a permanent status teacher. My husband would work. We'd make money, and our kids would grow up. And now we're living on one income.

[00:20:00]

We've moved out of the community that we were living, and sold our first house and moved to Truro. We have lost family members. We have lost friends of family that have been family friends for 24 years since my dad passed.

So to say that it's had a mass effect on my life would be, like, a valid thing to say. It's been horrible. My mental health has struggled incredibly. My kids have struggled. We've missed out. I had to miss out on dance recitals. I had to miss out on first-time things for my six-year-old daughter, so it's been horrible.

Alison Steeves

Do you have any final words, Katrina?

Katrina Burns

I just— I was very hesitant to come up and speak just because I've kind of stayed hidden for a little while, especially with the move. I had a lot of, kind of, backlash when it came to my choice and why I wouldn't just go with it. But I feel like it's very important to make note that I was classified in with a group of people just because they were fighting for a right, and I was then called a misogynistic racist. And if you know— Like if the people who know me, know that that's not who I am. That's not who I am as a mother. That's not who I am as a daughter. That's not who I am as a wife or as a teacher. So to be classified as that and to be treated the way I was treated by people who were a part of my life for so long is insane that this is has happened.

Alison Steeves

Thank you, Katrina.

Commissioner Massie

Thank you so much for your testimony. You started to mention that you used to be a rule follower. That's by temperament, I suppose. So have you now come up with being more questioning about rules?

Katrina Burns

Absolutely. Especially with the time at the hospital where things were just dismissed, I definitely question a lot more. And especially when it would come to my kids, there's definitely a lot more question when it comes to vaccinations. Even my hesitancy to go to a doctor if my kids are sick or if I'm sick is huge at this point.

Commissioner Massie

There's also another thing I missed in your— Maybe it's just me: When you went to the hospital, did they end up treating you properly?

Katrina Burns

So no. I didn't get into that part, but I was brought in and I went to triage, set down, and the nurses were whispering behind triage. And then I heard them say, "She's unvaccinated." So at this point, they handed me the little monitor to put on my finger. And then they proceeded to put their gear on. And then threw my identification bracelet at me, instead of handing it to me or putting it on. Asked my husband to leave, who had driven me in there and I live with. And then they brought me into the main area of the QE2 to kind of check my heart. But then again said, "She's unvaccinated," so moved me to another area.

The room that I went into had a bed with dirty linen all over it. And the nurse took the linen, threw it to the side and then told me to remove my shirt. Then another doctor came in, slapped the monitor on my chest then ripped it off, and security escorted me down to a room that had plastic boards up the middle of the walls. And then signs posted all over that said, "droplet exposure." They then allowed my husband to come back in, but had him fully dressed in mask, headgear, a gown, and made him sit six feet away from me.

They then came in. They took my blood. They then administered a COVID test. They took the COVID test right away, stuck my blood on the door. And every nurse or doctor that came in had to put on new gear and take off the gear as they left the room. I saw probably two nurses and then the doctor came in. The doctor disregarded all of my conversation about how I was feeling, proceeded to tell me they would not be sending my blood for any testing. They would send my COVID test, however, and I would hear back about my results from my COVID test. And then sent me on my way.

Commissioner Massie

Is that normal protocol?

[00:25:00]

Katrina Burns

It doesn't seem normal. My dad, as I mentioned, had multiple heart attacks. And when he went in, they did test his blood because usually the heart attack had passed by the time he got there. So I wasn't oblivious to that having to be done, but he told me that he would not be sending in my blood work.

Commissioner Massie

Thank you.

Alison Steeves

Thank you, Katrina.

Katrina Burns

Thank you.

[00:25:58]



Final Review and Approval: Jodi Bruhn, August 3, 2023.

The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an “intelligent verbatim” transcription method.

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