

In the 1930s, in the Dust Bowl of the Oklahoma pan handle, a homesteader named Caroline Henderson looked out at her bumper crop, now worthless, as a result of bottomed out wheat prices and wrote:

“How can we feel that our work has any dignity or importance when the world places so low value on the products of our toil?”

This is how we as educators and support staff feel as a direct result of the never ending cuts we have faced for what seems like forever.

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight.

My name is Ramona Elke. I am a support teacher, an English teacher, a math teacher, a science teacher, a social studies teacher, a drama teacher, a behaviour coach, a certified substance use counselor, a mother of 3, and the head of the Special Education department at Garibaldi Secondary school. I have been working with the most challenging, vulnerable, and at risk youth in the district...and I love it. I have worked in the trades program as an academic coordinator. I have been part of the district's forward thinking, now defunct, behaviour team. I have acted as a grief counselor during a year when I and many of my students lost not one but three friends and a teacher in one year. I loved all of it. As rough as it is many days of the week; I still love it.

What I don't love, however is feeling completely incompetent as a direct result of the fact that my case load has doubled in the past 2 years. When I began to work with at risk kids, my case load was only 13 or 15. I was able to stay on top of the little things so that the big things did not become so big.

I was a great coach for my colleagues, a great case manager for my kids, and a fantastic parent. I was Wonder Woman.

With a case load of 30 of some of the most challenging kids in the district – not just the school, I feel like a total failure. My colleagues are not updated the way they need to be. My mountain of paper work is not attended to with the expediency that it needs to be. And I am spread so thinly, because of the necessity to teach satellite courses, that I feel like I am always treading water, against the current, in a tank of sharks. All I have known is cut backs and down sizing in the most needy areas of our buildings. All I have ever known is “do more with less” to the point where none of us is able to. We just “do less with less” and beat ourselves up about it.

What this means, at the end of the day, is that all of these pressures effect how I, and my colleagues are able to service kids – the kids who have been shoved aside all of their lives. Many of these kids have no one but us. We are their families – and not just classroom teachers or support teachers...EAs (Education Assistance), Counselors, Office staff, Child Care Workers, Aboriginal Support Workers...we are their families. A loss to any of those areas affects us all...profoundly effects the kids. Kids who need everything we can give.

Kids need counselors who have time to see them when they need them. With the increase of diagnosed and undiagnosed anxiety and depression issues among youth, counselors and Child Care workers are of vital importance for the maintenance of the mental health of these vulnerable youth who are in constant emotional pain. Schools are being forced to

service mental health needs because community support has been slashed and, in many cases are non existent.

We are not only the “**front** line” we are the **only** line.

Creating an online version of counseling is not going to help either – I just thought I’d put that out there seeing as the answer these days seems to be to put a screen up in front of a kid to take the place of a living, breathing human being. Kids need humans not screens – computer, tablet, smart board, or smart phone. Only flesh and blood will do.

I am here to beg you to choose to find other places to cut than in numbers of classroom teachers, support teachers, EAs, Counselors, Office staff, or CCWs. These areas directly impact the educational experience that your children will be receiving. We cannot increase grad rates if we are consistently cut off at the knees.

We are the people who encourage the kids to be more than they ever believed they could be. We are the people who comfort kids who have broken hearts and broken lives. With cuts as deep as this and as for as many years as they have been happening, the message that is sent to us and to the kids is that they are not worth the very best we can give them. These kids deserve better. I deserve better. My colleagues deserve better. Do not believe the provincial hype – this is not about economics, it’s about kids. And cuts hurt kids. Period.