



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Truro, NS

Day 1

March 16, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 11: Cassandra Murray

Full Day 1 Timestamp: 07:48:00–08:22:55

Source URL: <https://rumble.com/v2ddo8a-nci-truro-day-1.html>

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Ches Crosbie

Kassandra, do you affirm that in the evidence you will give this Commission, you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Kassandra Murray

As a child of God, yes, I do.

Criss Hochhold

Thank you. Kassandra, would you please give us your full name?

Kassandra Murray

Kassandra Maureen Murray.

Criss Hochhold

Where do you live, Kassandra?

Kassandra Murray

in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Criss Hochhold

And what do you do for a living?

Kassandra Murray

I am a teacher.

Criss Hochhold

Fabulous. Where do you teach?

Kassandra Murray

Currently, I just teach privately. I used to teach, though, in a private school.

Criss Hochhold

Okay. Which private school, or school, were you teaching at?

Kassandra Murray

You want me to name the school?

Criss Hochhold

No, that's fine. Let's just say a private school.

Kassandra Murray

Yeah, it was a private school within the Halifax.

Criss Hochhold

And how long were you teaching at that private school?

Kassandra Murray

I was there for— I think, three years.

Criss Hochhold

Three years at that school. And how long were you a teacher overall?

Kassandra Murray

Over 20 years.

Criss Hochhold

Twenty years. That's some significant experience there.

Kassandra Murray

Correct.

Criss Hochhold

And what grades, or grade, did you teach?

Kassandra Murray

At the time, at that school, I was teaching a Grade 1-2 split.

Criss Hochhold

So that would make the kids about—?

Kassandra Murray

Anywhere from six to eight years old.

Criss Hochhold

Six to eight years old. When the mask requirements came in— You have a mask exemption from a physician, is that correct?

Kassandra Murray

That's correct.

Criss Hochhold

How was your experience getting that exemption?

Kassandra Murray

From my physician?

Criss Hochhold

Yes.

Kassandra Murray

My physician was really good about it, actually. I went in there and I explained to him why I didn't want to wear a mask, what I felt, how it would impact my health. And he had no problem giving me the exemption.

Criss Hochhold

Fantastic. Did the school respect that exemption?

Kassandra Murray

For a short while. But there was a lot of toxic and harmful situations I was put in—like, a hostile environment that I was put in, because I had that medical exemption.

Criss Hochhold

Okay. Can you give me an example of such a hostile act that they took towards you?

Kassandra Murray

Sure. When I first came in with the exemption, they were not really happy about it. They put it on file, though, so that it was well-documented that I had it. And they said that, because I wasn't wearing a mask, I had to—they didn't say I was segregated, but I'm saying it—I was segregated to use a different bathroom. I wasn't allowed to use the same bathroom as the rest of the faculty. I had to use a bathroom that was in the basement that wasn't very clean. The school had a mold mildew issue, which I was working on with my lungs too. So that didn't help it at all.

I had to use the bathroom in the basement. And every time I had to go to the bathroom, I had to leave the children, run down the stairs, go to the bathroom, come back up, and come back into the class. I also wasn't allowed to use the faculty room where they took their breaks. I had to go into this small closet that was right beside my room, that we used to use as a cubby room. And it was about—I don't know—maybe about five feet wide by about 20 feet deep. There was no ventilation in this room, just the door going out to the hall. So often when I would go into that room during break time, during my breaks, I would have to leave the door open to the hallway just so I could get some fresh air in there.

That room was also used that, if children were sick, then the child would have to go and be put in there. And if that was the case, I couldn't be in there and I needed to leave the building. So rain or shine, that's where I was.

Then the other piece was: I couldn't use the bathroom. I couldn't use the faculty room.

Criss Hochhold

Can you tell me about potential meetings, faculty meetings?

Kassandra Murray

Even though I wasn't allowed to use the faculty room, I had to stay six feet away from everybody. At a faculty meeting, I was allowed at the faculty meeting,

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where everybody was in the same room. They were six feet apart, and I wasn't wearing a mask. And some of the other faculty members would also take off their masks. I was allowed in that, but I wasn't allowed in the other situations.

Criss Hochhold

Please correct me if I'm mistaken. But you were able to attend faculty meetings with other faculty who were comfortable taking their masks off. Were you able to share a lunch space with that same faculty?

Kassandra Murray

No, I wasn't allowed to go in that room where they were doing that.

Kassandra Murray

And even at one time, if I may, I was sitting in that cubby space—that small closet—and I was doing some work and having something to eat. One of the faculty members, I was down

like, near the end, not near the hallway door. And a faculty member came by the door. She looked in and she said, “I’m going to close this door because you’re breathing in there.”

And she closed the door, and I didn’t know what to say. I said, “Fine.” And I just—yeah.

Criss Hochhold

She closed the door because you were breathing in there.

Kassandra Murray

Closed the door because I was breathing in there, yes!

Criss Hochhold

That’s very interesting, because I don’t normally go into rooms and not breathe.

Kassandra Murray

Yeah!

Criss Hochhold

I think we all have similar experiences; we all tend to breathe no matter where we go! Unless it’s the other place, and we won’t go there—

Kassandra, how did that make you feel?

Kassandra Murray

It was really traumatizing for me. It made me feel uneasy. I started seeing psychotherapists to kind of help me through the trauma of what it was doing to me. It made me feel really isolated and cut off from faculty members that I had called friends before. That now, I wasn’t a friend, you know, because I wasn’t complying.

Yeah, it was really harmful; it was really damaging to me. And then also, because it was such a toxic and harassing environment, I felt like I was policed all the time. They were walking by the room— Because I had to stay six feet away from the children within my classroom. And with grade one and two, which is like herding cats sometimes, it’s very difficult to stay six feet away from them without a mask. I would see teachers kind of peeking in the room, making sure there was no children around me and things like that. And they would often have parents come into my room to kind of “help,” because the parent would mask. And I wouldn’t.

Criss Hochhold

To your knowledge, were any of the other teachers “policed” like that?

Kassandra Murray

Not to my knowledge.

Criss Hochhold

Kassandra, because you were in such a position of care with really the most vulnerable and our most precious treasures, children: Did you have any special rituals that you would go through in the mornings to assess them somehow, just about their overall health or mental wellbeing?

Kassandra Murray

Yeah, so prior to the COVID protocols, I always met my children at the door every morning and shook their hand. We look at each other in the eye. We shake each other's hand, and we say good morning to one another. And it's a good way to connect with the child. It's a good way to get an assessment of: What does their hand feel like? What is their handshake like? Is it firm? Is it weak? Is it wet? Is it sweaty? Is it dry? Are they making eye contact with me? And it gives me a good indication of how I can best serve that child that day. And then at the end of the day, we would also do the same thing. But that stopped with the COVID protocols. I had to get creative and inventive.

Criss Hochhold

What do you mean when you say you get creative and inventive?

Kassandra Murray

I still wanted to— Because I know how harmful it is for a child to be disconnected. When they're in a traumatic experience or in an environment like that—where they're feeling fearful, because it was really inciting a lot of fear in the children—to have that connection is really important. Because they tend to disconnect and you can see that. I could see it in the class and how that was playing out with the children. I thought, "I need to somehow keep this connection with the children." So I had each child get a tree branch of some sort, six feet long. Then we decorated the ends: one end was a red or pink. The other end was blue.

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So that we always knew what end I would shake—the color—and what end they would shake—the color. So it wasn't getting mixed up, and we would still shake hands with the stick.

Criss Hochhold

Well, at least you were able to creatively form some sort of connection with the kids, even though the schools and the mandates brought in some rather ridiculous rules and procedures.

Kassandra, you've been a teacher for a long time. How would you compare the learning environment that was brought in by the school system at those times versus the years prior?

Kassandra Murray

Well, our faculty meetings became more and more geared towards how to police protocols for COVID and what Public Health was mandating. And so, then our teaching became more fear-based and informed that way with the children. You know, "Make sure you sanitize your hands every day before we go outside the room."

And if I may elaborate on that: one of the rules was that even if the children were going out into the hall to the bathroom to wash their hands with soap and water, they had to sanitize before they went out. Just in case they touched the walls. And there was one line going this way and, six feet apart, one line going this way, like a coming-and-going line. So they were watching to make sure I was making sure the children would self-sanitize. What happened was, one of the children came in and she had caustic burns on her hands from the sanitizer. And I thought, “Oh my god, this is awful, why are you doing this?” And her parent actually wrote in and said, “I do not want my child putting sanitizer on her hands. She’s fine to just wash them.” I was very grateful that that parent chimed in for that.

Criss Hochhold

Absolutely. You’ve seen some devastating things physically on the children because of the caustic burns from the overuse of sanitizer. What about their mental state?

When I think back when I was a kid—not that that’s a good thing—but you know, trying to have a happy childhood. And a teacher was that connection, particularly in those very early grades. Because really, at the end of the day, you do become a replacement parent for some little kids that are five, six, seven years old. You take on a bit of a motherly role.

Criss Hochhold

After the precautions were brought in, how was the learning environment? How were the kids? Like were kids being kids? Or what would you compare it to?

Kassandra Murray

Prior to the protocols, the children would go to each other’s desks. They would eat together; they would play games together; we would put all our desks together for birthday celebrations; we did all these things. After, we weren’t allowed to do that. And even outside, they were supposed to be six feet apart, and they weren’t allowed to sing. And they weren’t allowed to sing inside, and if they were singing outside, they had to sing six feet apart.

So the children become fearful of one another. Their self-regulation is being either stopped or it’s going to be delayed, because they’re unsure of what they need to do and where they need to go. Their cognition—

Because there were children that were masking in the class. It wasn’t mandated at that time for the children to be masked, but some families wanted their children masked, and some families even had children double-masked. And you could see the blood drain from their face. They didn’t have the rosy cheeks and things like that; you could really see the difference. Their cognition, their rate of taking something in and digesting the education that they were being given— It’s like eating a bad meal, right? It wasn’t working, and you could see that they couldn’t keep up or they were really tired, or they got tummy aches. You’d see a lot of that happening. And I had this special little tent in the room that I had to sanitize every time somebody came in or out of it. But at least it was a space where the child could curl up with their own little blankie and pillow.

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And just kind of regroup a little bit, reconnect in that space, a shelter.

Sorry if I’m going off on a tangent a bit.

Criss Hochhold

That's okay, you're talking about the kids and that's great.

Kassandra Murray

You can see that this development of self-trust, development and trust in others starts to get delayed, or impaired in some way. Because they're cut off, have sensory deprivation. Their sense of touch is cut off, even their sense of hearing could be cut off if they're not hearing their friends properly. Or somebody that is muffled, you know: other teachers that did come in and had a mask on, you can't properly hear tone in the voice. So you can't really comprehend what's being said to you. And there's a lot of sensory deprivation that was happening there. The sense of smell, taste—all of those things were slowly declining in the children that were wearing masks.

I found, where typically I had a certain curriculum, that I was bringing at a good rhythm and everybody was able to digest, now I really had to pull back on that. I really had to have intuitive pedagogy, right? Where you kind of have to intuit what the children's needs are and just meet them where they're at.

Criss Hochhold

Absolutely. As with any school system, whether public or private, there would be learning outcomes that should be met or need to be met, so we know that the kids are progressing at a set pace, if you will.

Do you find that you were able to meet those learning objectives that had been set for those kids?

Kassandra Murray

I would say those learning objectives were definitely delayed. Like I just said, where I had a certain rhythm, you knew by this time: you wouldn't be meeting these outcomes. Typically, that's how it worked, but they were really pulled back—not just because of the impairment of the children being able to digest the information, but also from the onset of the unnecessary protocols that we were always told to police with the children, to make sure they understood the rules and what needed to happen. And then trying to explain that to the children in a way that's loving and kind and warm so that it doesn't further incite any fear.

Criss Hochhold

Absolutely. That makes perfect sense, Kassandra. I'm just going to take you back for a moment because your colleagues certainly seemed to have an extreme fear of someone that wasn't wearing a mask. How did the kids feel when you showed up in the classroom with no mask? Did you have to give an explanation as to why you, this teacher, is not wearing a mask and some of the rest of the teachers are?

Kassandra Murray

With children at this age, typically they're part of the whole. They haven't really quite come into their own self-individuality. That usually happens around the nine-year change. At this age, their consciousness is more, "I'm part of the whole. You're part of me, I'm part of you." There were some children that were like, "Miss Kassandra, why don't you have to wear a

mask?” I said, “Well, I choose not to wear a mask.” I’m not going to get into it with the child. And that was the end of that. I just gave them a very simple answer, and that was the end of that. So that was how that was met.

But ultimately, they didn’t really pay attention. Like you said earlier, they look to you like children still. They call you “mom” half the time in class instead of Miss Cassandra. “Oh yeah—sorry, Miss Cassandra.” Right? Because they’re looking for that adult that is giving them, nurturing them, and providing them with an environment of love and warmth. And they just want to hug, come into the folds of that. And so, yeah, so there were children that would just unconsciously want to naturally come up and give me a hug. And I would kind of hide them off to the side, right? “Okay, shh, we’re not hugging!” So anyway. Yeah.

Criss Hochhold

Wow. It’s kind of frightening what happened and what managed to be brought in and imposed on our children. I don’t really have any other questions, but is there anything that you feel that you’d like to ask before I defer to the commissioners?

Please go ahead.

[00:20:00]

Kassandra Murray

Yeah. So, one of the other things that had happened, just to give you another picture, is the executive director, who’s supposed to be impartial and fair to everyone: one day I was walking close to the office, and she was coming out of the office, which meant that we were kind of going by close to one another and she had her mask on. She literally turned her back to me because I was walking beside her.

And then after, there was a time where we all went online. I won’t even get into how detrimental that is for children, but then we went online learning. And when we were coming back from the online learning, it was mandated that all the children and everyone within the school had to wear a mask. Even the little pre-primary ones all had to wear a mask. So they called me, and they said, “We can’t have you come back to school. We can no longer honor your medical exemption and we won’t, and we can’t have you back to school. What we’re going to do is we’re going to put you on paid leave, but we’re going to have a substitute teacher lead your class and you have to provide them with lesson plans.” I did that for a few weeks and then everybody went off online again.

So then, near the end of the school year—I think it was the end of May, beginning of June, I’m not quite sure, but this is 2021—they were going to go back into the classroom for one or two weeks. They said, “Well, we can’t have you back in the classroom; we can’t honour your medical exemption and we won’t. Unless you want to wear this helmet—” It’s called a microclimate helmet; they were willing to pay over \$400 for this microclimate helmet that looks like one of those old sea diver helmets. I thought, “No, I’m not; those children have enough. I am not stepping in front of those children with that.” Never mind my own trauma of having to deal with that, and I have a medical exemption.

So that was where I said “no.” And they just kept making this environment for me at the school very toxic, very hostile. Watching me all the time. All these little things adding up and I decided that this was not in my contract; this was not the terms of my employment.

My terms of employment were significantly changed. And so, due to the employer's conduct, I felt forced to leave my job. And I made my decision to resign.

Criss Hochhold

Fantastic. So just quickly to reiterate: you had a valid medical exemption from a physician in Nova Scotia. And the school chose to disregard it entirely and essentially told you, "Your exemption means nothing to us. If you want to come and put on a spacesuit and teach—" Because that would be a wholesome environment to them.

Kassandra Murray

That's correct.

Criss Hochhold

Thank you very much, Kassandra.

Kassandra Murray

You're very welcome.

Criss Hochhold

Have a great day.

Commissioner Drysdale

I have a couple of short questions. I believe you mentioned that there were still faculty meetings going on.

Kassandra Murray

Correct.

Commissioner Drysdale

And you'd attend those faculty meetings. Some people didn't have masks on and yet seem to be okay. My question has to do with the intent, or the content of those faculty meetings. How much time, if any, in those faculty meetings was spent discussing the protocols for masking, et cetera, versus what protocols should be in place to compensate for the things you were seeing going wrong with children? With their learning being reduced or being impeded and some of the social issues.

My question is: How much time were they spending trying—those coming up with protocols—

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to mitigate the effects of the masks on the children's learning environment?

Kassandra Murray

I would bring something up to try to mitigate, and I was immediately shut down. There was very little to none on mitigation. I would say that probably one third of the meeting was spent on protocols, what we need to do, how we could be better. I even have an email that was sent out by the executive, by the education director. It was sent out to all the faculty. And she specifically named me in this email, and she says, “For you, Kassandra, I would ask that you double up on your physical distancing and also support the parents who come in to support the class during transitions as well as in class time.”

So I was really put in the spotlight because of what was a private thing for me with my medical exemption. And that was put out through the whole school.

Commissioner Drysdale

I just want to make sure I understand that they said you had to double up on your distancing.

Kassandra Murray

That’s what they wanted me to do.

Commissioner Drysdale

Your distancing was six feet and they wanted—

Kassandra Murray

They wanted me to do 12 feet.

Commissioner Drysdale

How many kids were in the classroom?

Kassandra Murray

How many did I have that year? I remember, I would say approximately 18.

Commissioner Drysdale

Would it be possible in a classroom to be 12 feet away from 18 children?

Kassandra Murray

No.

Commissioner Drysdale

I have one other question, and maybe it’s just I didn’t understand something about this. I thought you said that you weren’t allowed to go into the lunchroom and have lunch with the staff?

Kassandra Murray

Correct.

Commissioner Drysdale

Did they eat their lunch with the mask on?

Kassandra Murray

I wouldn't know because I wasn't allowed in the faculty room!

Commissioner Drysdale

Thank you, that's all I've got.

Kassandra Murray

You're welcome.

Commissioner Massie

I have two questions. One short question. You probably have heard— I've never seen it myself, because I've been out of the university and school, and so on, for a long time. I've heard that there are a lot of issues in the American campus, but maybe also in some places in Canada, about the so-called safe space and microaggression. That is, people that are sensitive to opinions or behavior. And I'm trying to understand what that could represent in an environment but with teenagers or young adults. Maybe this is something that can be, I don't know, managed somehow.

But in a school with children like that and among adults, which are the faculty: Would you compare what you've lived through to something like microaggression?

Kassandra Murray

I don't know. I'm not sure how to answer that question. I know I felt segregated, and I felt discriminated against. I just felt very isolated. I don't know about the microaggression piece.

Commissioner Massie

So how did you feel emotionally?

Kassandra Murray

Oh, emotionally. Emotionally, I was really traumatized. I was really sad, and I was thinking, "What am I going to do for work now, how am I going to make a living? I can't go back into that environment; they won't even let me back into that environment." You know, they made it very difficult for me.

I went into this very anxious, stressful state of fight or flight and thinking, "Okay, I need to go boots in. And just get moving and figure out what I'm going to do." And that's where I was really grateful that I had this doctor that was helping me, a psychotherapist. Because she was really helpful to help me get through that stage.

Commissioner Massie

My other question— Maybe you're not aware of it, but in Quebec they conducted a very extensive study to look at the impact of these measures in school on the learning process and behavior of the children, and so on.

Are you aware of similar studies in Nova Scotia?

Kassandra Murray

I'm not aware of similar studies in Nova Scotia directly.

But from some of my training in working with transdisciplinary healing education, working with educating traumatized children, right?

[00:30:00]

And seeing how trauma and these things not only have mental health implications and psychotherapy indications for the children at the time— If it's not worked out immediately, it can turn into other illnesses and disease, right? But it also can have a delay in the development of their organs, in the development of how they move and their growth.

So there is a lot that can happen physiologically and psychologically with the children.

Commissioner Massie.

Thank you.

Criss Hochhold

Thank you very much Kassandra, I really appreciate your time.

Oh—I'm sorry, my apologies. Let me take that back for a moment. I'm sorry. I still appreciate your time, but we have one more question.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Hi Kassandra, I just want to take it just a little bit bigger, broader. Who determined the protocols? Was it external and was it the provincial health, or was it just internal within the private school system?

Kassandra Murray

We were told that they were getting their mandates from Public Health. That's what we were told at faculty meetings. The school had put together a small group of individuals— teachers and parents that put together what they felt were the measures and protocols that our school would be doing. So they were getting this from Public Health; they were getting whatever mandates or protocols. And then they would take that, and then they would implement it in a way, for our school, following those guidelines. That was my understanding. That's what we were told.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Were you ever given a copy of those mandates from provincial health, or you just read about in the media, that kind of thing?

Kassandra Murray

I don't recall being given anything. I just remember us being told this was what was happening. Yeah, it was kind of like an agenda note, right? This is part of our agenda. But it didn't go into—

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Did you see any discrepancies with what was happening within your private school as compared to other schooling alternatives in Nova Scotia? I'm not from here, so that's why I asked.

Kassandra Murray

I wasn't sure what was happening in the public school system because I'm not part of that. I just knew what was happening in our private school, I didn't know too much about what was happening in the other school systems. I was just really involved with what we were doing.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And then one final question: In terms of incident reporting, was there any reporting process within the school system for the hand sanitizer issue?

Kassandra Murray

No, there was no incident reporting for that. It was the parents coming back to say, "my daughter has caustic burns from this overuse of sanitizer, and I don't want her using it anymore."

Commissioner Kaikkonen

There would be no path to document what was happening with that child and taking that information—sorry, I just lost my voice, I think—to the public health authorities?

Kassandra Murray

Not that I'm aware of.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Okay, thank you.

Criss Hochhold

Is there one more question forthcoming? No.

We do have an audience question for you, Kassandra, as well. The question is: Thinking of air quality and our scent-free schools, did the hand sanitizer have any negative impact?

Kassandra Murray

As far as scent sensitivity?

Criss Hochhold

Yeah. Usually I find that, and I'm going to presume that with whoever is asking the question— Are you talking about scented hand sanitizers? Because they were both available, I believe, at the schools.

Kassandra Murray

Have a smell to them, yeah. In my class personally, I didn't notice any scent sensitivities to the sanitizer, only the physical sensitivities of rash, the burns, things like that.

Criss Hochhold

Wonderful. I believe we've got all the answers to all the questions. Thank you once again very much, Kassandra.

Kassandra Murray

Thank you.

Ches Crosbie

Thank you all. The hearings will rise for the day and reconvene tomorrow at 9 a.m. Thank you.

[00:34:55]

NCI | CeNC

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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