

## **SFU dean defends 'no test' teacher; He says the educator was protecting her students from 'psychological and educational vandalism'**

Vancouver Sun

Tuesday, October 30, 2007

Page: B7

Section: Westcoast News

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Source: Vancouver Sun

The dean of education at Simon Fraser University says a teacher who defied her employer by refusing to deliver a mandatory reading test to her Grade 3 students should serve as an inspiration and role model for all teachers.

In a speech to SFU graduates this month, Paul Shaker praised Kathryn Sihota, a Vancouver Island teacher, for engaging in civil disobedience to protect her students from "psychological and educational vandalism," despite knowing that she risked discipline and public disapproval for her actions.

"You should remember that you entered the profession at the moment when this courageous teacher was taking her principled stand," Shaker told graduates in a fall convocation speech now posted on SFU's website. "Let her character, conviction and willingness to act be an inspiration to you."

Although his comments landed in the midst of a province-wide debate about the value of standardized tests, Shaker said in an interview he was making a point about the need for professionals to take non-violent action in defence of their principles and he was not passing judgment on the tests.

But he admitted he is particularly sensitive to the debate about standardized tests because before moving to Canada he spent many years as an educator in the U.S., where he said students have been damaged through rampant abuse of high-stakes testing.

"I like to think that won't happen in Canada," he said, "but I don't think that we can be complacent."

B.C. Education Minister Shirley Bond said it was irresponsible of Shaker to encourage teachers to engage in civil disobedience rather than working cooperatively with others on issues of mutual interest.

"It's unfortunate when political agendas become part of a graduation speech

to teachers in the province," Bond added.

But the B.C. Teachers' Federation, which supported Sihota in her fight with the Sooke board, cheered Shaker's stance.

"It's so heartening to see someone outside of teaching and someone with the stature of Paul Shaker ... making those comments, especially to student teachers," union vice-president Susan Lambert said in an interview.

A longtime teacher and union leader, Sihota said she decided not to administer the District Assessment of Reading test to her students at Millstream elementary after seeing a nervous child break down in tears.

She said the test was not worth that amount of stress.

As a result of that decision, Sihota was called before the Sooke board of education last month and given a letter of discipline for insubordination, which her union has grieved.

Shaker, when asked by The Sun if he agrees the tests are damaging to students, insisted he wasn't taking a position on the tests. "That judgment would have to be made in the context of the teacher in the classroom," he said.

But in his speech to almost 300 new teachers, Shaker said they have a professional obligation "to protect our students, not only from bullets or brutality, as we have seen teachers regularly do, but also from psychological and educational vandalism against their spirits. And this is what Kathryn Sihota has sought to do."

Penny Tees, head of the B.C. School Trustees' Association, declined to discuss Sihota's actions but said she doesn't accept the contention that tests damage students' spirits. She noted that even B.C.'s representative for children and youth, Mary-Ellen Turpel-Lafond, has defended the tests.

"If every teacher had the right to eliminate the pieces of the curriculum that they personally don't agree with and don't want to teach, then we would have a very, very hard time managing a public school curriculum," said Tees.

Shaker said he does not have a problem with the most controversial standardized test in B.C. -- the Foundation Skills Assessment -- but is highly critical of the way it is used to rank schools.

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Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun / Paul Shaker, dean of education at SFU, says teacher Kathryn Sihota should be an inspiration and role model for all teachers.
- Colour Photo: Kathryn Sihota

Idnumber: 200710300065

Edition: Final

Story Type: News

Length: 625 words Keywords: EDUCATION; TEACHERS

Illustration Type: Colour Photo