**Victoria Jones 11-4-24 SC Speech**

 Good evening, members of the school committee, Mayor Mitchell, Superintendent O'Leary, and members of the administration.

 My name is Victoria Jones, and I am proud to serve as a teacher at Hayden McFadden Elementary School. I also hold a position on the NBEA executive board and co-chair the negotiations team. As a resident of New Bedford and the sole income provider for my household, I want to speak today on behalf of the NBEA about the pressing concerns regarding the rising cost of living in our city.

 Despite holding a master’s degree and having dedicated my career to education here in New Bedford, I find myself working an additional 20 to 30 hours a week at a second job just to afford a home in this community. I know I am not alone in this struggle; many teachers and single-income families are facing similar challenges.

 The reality is that the escalating costs of housing and basic living expenses are making it increasingly difficult for single-income households to rent or buy homes in New Bedford. This is disheartening for those of us who have committed ourselves to serving and enriching our community.

 I am deeply concerned about the sustainability of our schools and the community as a whole. How can we retain talented, dedicated educators if they cannot afford to live here? At my own school, we have seen experienced teachers leave for neighboring districts that offer better compensation and more favorable living conditions. These are educators whom New Bedford Public Schools have invested in through professional development, course reimbursement, and opportunities for certification in ESL or special education. Yet, they are taking their skills and dedication elsewhere.

 For instance, one teacher who left this year was integral to our ESL Newcomer’s program, providing invaluable support to our ESL students. Another was our reading specialist for fourth and fifth graders, a position that remains unfilled, leaving our students without essential reading intervention as they prepare for the upcoming MCAS.

 I believe we all share a common goal: to retain high-quality educators in our schools. The NBEA is committed to achieving a strong contract that ensures fair compensation and empowers our educators to continue investing in our children and our community.

 Together, we can create an environment where teachers want to stay and thrive, ultimately benefiting our students and the future of New Bedford.

Thank you.