



## COMMENTARY\*

"STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH SHOULD BE A PRIORITY"

by  
Robert Burroughs  
Executive Director

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Every winter, the New Brunswick Student Alliance meets with members of the Legislative Assembly to discuss how New Brunswick can leverage the wealth of knowledge and potential human capital of our postsecondary education (PSE) sector to build a stronger, more prosperous society.

By and large, our politicians are engaged in student issues and are committed to making PSE more accessible and affordable in this province. However, increasingly, students worry that our political leaders of all stripes neither understand the purpose of the Tuition Access Bursary (TAB) nor the point of our public postsecondary sector.

This has most recently been on display at the PC leadership debates. During their campaigns, we have heard how central the economy is to everyone's visions for this province. However, a gaping hole in their economic policies remain: postsecondary education. The policy that drives the TAB program addresses the necessity for the skills to navigate through and grow a knowledge-based economy. It also emphasises the role of education as a means of poverty alleviation. It would, therefore, be foolish to simply dismiss the TAB as a product of 'education policy'; it is economic policy.

I single out the leadership race because the winner of this contest could well have a tremendous influence on the welfare of a generation of students. It would behoove all who seek that office to know what they are talking about.

Several candidates described the TAB as a mere accounting problem, claiming it was designed for "a group of New Brunswickers that took benefits away from everybody else." Yes: the TAB targets the province's most impoverished and seeks to help those who could not otherwise participate in the new economy to do so. I should not have to spell



out that increasing participation in the economy is good economic policy. Yes: the “benefits” — which were economically inefficient and actually only impacted a fraction of the opposition and media’s inflated estimates — no longer apply to upper-middle class parents. Not students: parents.

Candidates need to understand that student outcomes are economic outcomes. That is why all around the world governments are recognizing that investment in their higher education sectors is smart economic policy. We need to get on the same page as the rest of the world. There is a strong national consensus on the need for innovation as an economic driver and if this province wants to be competitive, then we need people who have those skills. We cannot raise economic performance without investing in skills and these skills are developed in our PSE sector.

Our sector’s job is not to respond to industry-specific booms, but to provide our graduates with transferable skills that facilitate societal transformation. Our PSE graduates will be the economic backbone of this province. That is why continued attempts by the opposition parties to perpetuate factually incorrect narratives of the TAB frustrate the efforts of those actually trying to remove barriers to PSE. Knowledge-based competitiveness drives traditional sectors as well as new ones. That does not happen however, unless our political leaders are serious about backing New Brunswick’s students.

What we do to maximize the potential human capital in this province will determine our future prosperity. However, this requires committed and consistent investments in the PSE sector and programs like the TAB. That is why opposition to the TAB is perplexing and unimaginative. The next leader of the PC Party will need to overcome their reactionary instincts and transcend politics to do what is right for the economy. Increasing access to PSE is good economic policy.

However, access is not about rewarding the richer with tax breaks at the expense of the poorest. Access is not about punishing students to support upper-middle class parents. Access is not tied to some arbitrary and subjective measure of “good behaviour” like academic performance, which is antithetical to the notion of needs-based aid. Nor is access centred around the unconstitutional impression that our government can impose upon New Brunswick’s youth a limitation on our mobility. Access is not subject to a job on the other side.

Access is about investing in and trusting our own people. Access is about growing the number of first generation students, the majority of whom come from low-income families — the ones TAB would help, who will contribute to the expansion of our knowledge-based economy. Access is about looking at the highest urban child poverty rate in the country and endeavouring to lower it by removing the financial barriers to PSE.



Access is about showing our youth that the pathway to building a stronger New Brunswick is through PSE. That is how you attract people with “skin in the game” to stick around and fight for a more prosperous and equitable society.

Access is good economic policy.

So if the next leader chooses to “scrap the TAB on day one,” they better have something else ready for implementation in its stead — something with better policy and better financial commitment. Otherwise, we hope it is clear what — our future — we would be throwing away as a province and the damage such a decision would have on our economy.

Our organisation has noted several times now that the TAB program is not perfect, but the policy is sound. We are working with the ministry, along with the universities and our partners at the FÉÉCUM to make it better and increase access by doing so. Independent of partisan politics, we support the foundational policy that guides the TAB because it is progressive, it is evidence-based, and it is good for our economy.