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STUDENTS REJECT CHANGES TO STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

Fredericton, N.B. - The NBSA firmly opposes all changes announced to student financial assistance yesterday by the Government of New Brunswick. These changes include plans to introduce a Renewed Tuition Bursary (RTB) and to eliminate the Timely Completion Benefit (TCB).

The RTB program is meant to replace the existing Free Tuition Program (FTP) and Tuition Relief for the Middle Class (TMRC) suite and the elimination of TCB comes with no plans to introduce any other means of debt relief for students in the province.

“Despite the government’s misleading messaging of these changes being an ‘extension’ to the FTP and TRMC programs, the newly announced RTB effectively ends the provision of free tuition to students from low-income families,” said Brianna Workman, chair of the NBSA’s board of directors. “As a result, these regressive changes will have a devastating impact New Brunswick’s most vulnerable and marginalised students.”

Students will now receive a maximum provincial grant of $3,000 for university students or $1,500 for college students, based upon their family size and income. This is a substantial cut to the previous thresholds where university students were eligible for provincial grants up to $10,000 and up to $5,000 for college students.

Under the RTB program, eligible full-time students attending both public and private institutions will have access. The government contends that the new inclusion of private institutions makes student financial aid “fairer.”

Private institutions receive 20 per cent more government financial support per student than students attending public institutions and these students receive almost three times as much funding through the New Brunswick Bursary than students at public universities.

“In addition to the fact that because private institutions are not held to, and do not meet the same standards of accountability and quality of education that public universities are expected to, we reject the inclusion of private institutions in RTB,” said Emma Miller, vice-chair of the NBSA’s board of directors. “Especially where the inclusion of these institutions has come at a cost to students coming from the poorest families in the
province, it is extremely difficult to see how these changes make student financial assistance ‘fairer’ in any way.”

In addition, the Timely Completion Benefit, the only debt relief program available in the province, has been eliminated and will not be replaced with another program. Where New Brunswick students carry the highest average level of debt in Canada at an average of $35,200, eliminating this program with no plans to provide New Brunswick graduates with any support with their debt is irresponsible and extremely disappointing.

“The cuts made to the upfront assistance through grants, paired with the elimination of TCB will certainly result in higher levels of student debt,” said Emily Blue, executive director of the NBSA. “High debt levels are linked with slow economic growth and outmigration and in a province who struggles to retain its youth, the elimination of TCB is highly concerning.”

In addition, the Tuition Tax Credit will be reintroduced for students, and families, to claim when they file their taxes in 2020. Research consistently has shown that educational tax credits tend to disproportionately benefit higher-income households and high-income earners.

“Tax credits are in no way a replacement debt relief program and have been proven to do nothing to increase access to postsecondary for those who struggle financially,” said Workman. “For a government that speaks about the need for evidence-based policy and a world-class education system, the reintroduction of the tax credit and the negative changes to financial aid is contrary to this government’s asserted goals and a step backwards for the province.”

In January 2019, the Government of New Brunswick asked key stakeholders to submit responses to questions regarding the effectiveness of the FTP and TRMC programs, versus programs that were previously used, such as the Tuition Rebate Program and Tuition Tax Credits.

The responses submitted by student organisations, universities, and faculty all supported the maintenance of FTP and TRMC and rejected the idea of reintroducing tuition tax credits. Research being completed by the New Brunswick Institute of Research, Data, and Training has, in its first stages, found that FTP and TRMC were working in their mandate to increase access to postsecondary education.

As a result, these changes are not only regressive policy measures which are sure to have devastating impacts on students in the province, but they also demonstrate a
complete failure of the Higgs government to listen to students in a conversation that is fundamentally about their education and experience.

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