

Student Financial Assistance Review Update

Mr. Speaker, three years ago I was mandated to initiate a review of our government's Student Financial Assistance program with the goal of improving access to post-secondary education for all Northwest Territories residents by reducing barriers and ensuring benefit levels are meeting the needs of students.

I am happy to stand here today and say that we have completed our review, and are now taking steps towards implementing necessary, significant changes to the program to better meet the needs of students.

The review examined the Student Financial Assistance program's alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation of Canada Calls to Action, the Final Report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Calls for Justice, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and analyzed feedback received through a Client Satisfaction Survey. Based on the findings of the review, the department is proposing significant enhancements to the program.

Mr. Speaker, to improve affordability and accessibility to post-secondary education, the department is increasing the benefit levels for tuition, books and monthly living allowances. To better assist students with disabilities, we are increasing the Grants for Students with Disabilities to align with the Canada Student Financial Assistance program and expanding supports to students with persistent or prolonged disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, this government recognizes that Indigenous students in the NWT may face additional barriers with accessing post-secondary education. To alleviate some of these challenges, the department has proposed to remove the semester limit for eligible Indigenous students to access the Student Financial Assistance program. This will better

support Indigenous students with pursuing their post-secondary studies by increasing the flexibility to complete their post-secondary education without concern of maxing out on the number of semesters for which they can receive Student Financial Assistance. This change will also encourage Indigenous students to pursue post-secondary education beyond undergraduate degrees, such as Masters.

Mr. Speaker, in an effort to ensure consistency on how living costs are determined, the department is aligning the monthly living allowance with the Canada Market Basket Measure and will continue to calculate rates based on family size. The department is also increasing living allowance rates for all NWT students, removing the semester limit for Remissible Loans and expanding Remissible Loans to all NWT residents, regardless of any years of schooling completed in the territory. This change will improve accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education, allowing NWT residents to obtain the education to help them succeed and build the NWT workforce.

Mr. Speaker, this government is mindful that students may face unexpected challenges throughout an academic year, which could result in their withdrawal or failure from a course or program. The department recognizes that suspending students from receiving Student Financial Assistance may add additional barriers to their ability to successfully complete their post-secondary education, so we are proposing to remove financial assistance suspensions for failing or withdrawing courses. This will ensure that students continue to be able to access the Student Financial Assistance program for the duration of a student's academic career, regardless of any setbacks.

Mr. Speaker, the department has been working diligently to ensure regulations and policies are amended along with developing a performance measurement plan to evaluate the performance of the program. The regulations are currently posted for a public review with feedback due to the department by May 31. I am pleased to advise that we are well on our way to having these proposed changes ready for students who are wanting to attend post-secondary studies this fall. I would encourage any students considering attending post-

secondary schooling to complete an application prior to the June 30th deadline, a student does not need to be accepted into a program to apply.

Mr. Speaker, these changes will ensure that the Student Financial Assistance program continues to be one of the best, if not the best, student financial aid programs in the country.

Kinanāskomitin, Mr. Speaker.