

Postsecondary Education Affordability

Questions to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology in the Alberta Legislature, Wednesday, March 11, 2009.

Mr. Rodney: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently I've had a number of conversations with concerned constituents with regard to postsecondary education. I know that Albertans and specifically Albertan parents and students are well aware of the benefits of being able to save for education after grade 12.

My first question, therefore, is to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. During these economic times, that are quite difficult and daunting for many, what is the minister doing to ensure that middle and lower income Albertans can save for their children's postsecondary education?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have a number of programs that can help Albertans realize postsecondary education. It's a very high priority for this government. This past year, as an example, we expanded the Rutherford scholarships to include those high school students who recorded averages between 75 and 80 per cent. It used to be above 80 per cent. There are numerous nonrepayable provincial government grants and bursaries available for students who demonstrate financial need, and a lot of our programs are targeted to those students or those adults who have a financial need. Our Alberta student loan program is one of the finest in the country, and our scholarship and bursary program is probably the largest in the country.

Mr. Rodney: My second question is to the same minister. That will answer some of the constituent questions but not others. In light of the downturn of the economy I wonder if the minister can ensure that the Alberta incentive programs for postsecondary savings such as the Alberta centennial education savings program will continue to support Albertan students.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this point the ACES program remains consistent with past years of the program. Awareness and access are both on the upswing. I would admit that in the initial years of the program awareness by parents wasn't really all that high. At present 53 credit unions, scholarship foundations, and other financial service providers are processing ACES applications, and that's a fourfold increase since 2005. So, as I said, awareness is coming up. One of the greatest investments that any Albertan can make is in a postsecondary education, and our government works to ensure that that dream is possible for every Albertan.

Mr. Rodney: My final question is to the same minister, and it has to do with student loans and applying for them. Parents are often required, of course, to fund a wide range of costs to help children through postsecondary education regardless of these aforementioned affordability programs that are available. I'm wondering and my constituents need to know: are there plans to further reduce the financial commitments required by parents when students are applying for student loans?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, as part of the affordability framework two years ago the government of Alberta and the federal government made significant investments to reduce those parental contributions. At present parental contribution is required from, really, a very small proportion of students who require financial aid. In 2007-08 only about 5 per cent of funded students in Alberta were required to have a parental contribution. That's only about 2,400 students. Forty per cent of those parental contributions were less than a thousand dollars. Within the Alberta student financial assistance program we do have an appeal mechanism if students need to appeal that process, but we're working to make it better.