

Student assistance

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Good morning, Speaker. I rise today to recognize some exceptional students from Beal, CCH and Central in London, part of a group that organized and led a high school walkout to advocate for education investments and to fight against foolish cuts to the Ontario Student Assistance Program. I met with Madeline Glinoga, Haidyn Marchand, Saturn Beer and Calico Richard, and was deeply moved by their passion, leadership and commitment to standing up for what's right. These young leaders are not merely fighting for their own future, but for the future of all students in our community.

I also met with student representatives from Lucas, including Ashley Choi and Julie Yang, who told me about friends and siblings who are considering abandoning their programs in the middle of their degree and know many more who are potentially giving up on post-secondary education before it even starts.

Students are mobilizing and taking action, Speaker. Youth have the power to create change, and they are setting a powerful example for future generations of leaders. Their advocacy for accessible education is not just about protecting OSAP, it's about ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or financial situation. Young people are asking: Are these changes a poorly veiled punishment for being poor? Education is a powerful social and economic mobilizer. Why on earth are Conservatives ruining that?

Speaker, students are showing us all what it means to lead with conviction. I'm proud to stand today to commend their dedication, determination and unwavering commitment to creating a better future for all. Thank you for inspiring us all.

Peter Clark

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Orléans on a point of order.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Yesterday in Ottawa, on crossing guard awareness day, a crossing guard was hit during a hit-and-run incident while helping kids get to school. I've just learned that he's passed as a result of his injuries. And so, could I have a moment of silence for his family? Thank you.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Orléans is asking for unanimous consent for a moment of silence to recognize the passing of a traffic guard. Agreed? Agreed.

The House observed a moment's silence.

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Ms. Marit Stiles: This question is to the Premier. Yesterday, Premier, we gave you an opportunity to reverse course. It is clear that you have not taken the time to listen to students and their families who are impacted by this government's cuts to OSAP.

I wanted to share something with the Premier today that I heard from a nursing student at Mohawk College recently and that she asked me to share. She says, "As a mother of three and a nursing student, OSAP is not just financial aid to me. It is the reason I am able to stay in school.... Choosing to go back to school was not an easy decision. It meant reducing my income, balancing clinical placements, assignments, exams and raising young children, including a baby who still needs daycare."

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My question to the Premier is, what does the Premier have to say to students like this who are having to stop their education because of his cuts?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The Premier and I have been very clear: The OSAP framework was unsustainable. In fact, the Auditor General stated it was unsustainable in 2017 as well, but a desperate Liberal government decided to move forward with 85% grants because they were desperate.

We understand that we need the financial aid not just for these students but for the next generation of students. When it comes to health human resources we do have our Ontario Learn and Stay Grant, in which we've invested over \$173 million, helping 13,000 students in health human resource programming.

We will continue to be there for our students.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Eight years in—eight years in—and they still can't stop blaming everybody else for their problems. This government may not be phased by the stories like the one I've just shared, but I am. I look up at the students in this gallery today. They feel the future slipping through their fingers. That is what they are telling us. They are just asking for a chance—a fair chance—to finish what they started, or start at all.

So I ask the Premier again: Will he listen to the students and the families across this province and stop his cuts to OSAP grants?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The Leader of the Opposition is worried about her leadership slipping through her fingers. She's had her deputy leader go over to the Liberal side because that party is chaos.

We'll continue to be there. We just invested \$6.4 billion into the sector, the largest single investment into post-secondary education not only in Ontario history but Canadian history. We will continue to be there for the sector, as we always have been.

But I will remind the member: the Rae days. When she was a staffer in the Bob Rae government, tuition went up three times the rate of inflation at the hands of that government. And it went up three times the rate of inflation when the Liberals were in power as well.

So thank God we've been in power for the last eight years, because tuition would be over \$14,000 if you were in power.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, Speaker, I wish I could say this was surprising, but none of it is.

I'll tell you the other thing I keep hearing from students is they think that the reason that maybe this Premier is making these cuts that are going to predominantly impact low- and middle-income students is because he can't empathize with them. He can't empathize with the experiences of regular young people and families in this province. As many young people have pointed out to me, he was raised with a silver spoon in his mouth, right? He's been strolling

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down easy street his whole life. He never had to worry about affording tuition, like so many young people and so many families have to do today.

But I'm going to tell you this: Students in Ontario are not going to be just handed some sort of cushy executive job in their dad's company when they graduate. So doesn't the Premier get that not everyone in Ontario has it as easy as he did?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I am proud to be the first Minister of Colleges and Universities that is a college grad—and that was on purpose. We came from a one-income family. I had no silver spoon in my mouth. I've been called a burger flipper many, many times. I stayed because I wanted to open a business and going to university would have put debt on my career. I had to ensure I stayed local. I made the choice to stay local because I wanted to open a small business. I made the difficult decision to ensure I stayed local so that I afforded college to be able to open a small business.

I will remind you, the ratios from grants to loan are exactly in line with BC and Manitoba, your NDP friends.

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Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. Again, after eight long years, this Premier and his Conservative government are so out of touch, they can't see that there's an affordability crisis. And if you needed any confirmation on that, you just have to look to what the Premier and his party did to young people and their families when they broke OSAP, driving young people and their families further into debt. And don't ask me—just take it from Leigh: "I am a single parent on low income sending my daughter to university to become a mechanical engineer so she will not have to struggle like me. And now after her first year she may not be able to afford to go for her second year."

So, Speaker, why is the Premier and his party making life harder for young people and their families, and will they fix OSAP ASAP?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The interim leader needs to stop fearmongering and recognize that we have a higher grant ratio than under 15 years of Liberal government.

That member actually ignored the Auditor General in 2017 when they were desperate, and they decided to hopefully hang on to government and increase it to 85%. The Auditor General made it very clear it was unsustainable, Speaker.

Since the federal government has changed our career colleges and the uptake of OSAP, we saw a \$2.3 billion pressure this August, if we did not act. We are acting, Speaker, to ensure that OSAP is sustainable, not just for these students but for the next generation's students behind them as well.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The leader of the third party.

Mr. John Fraser: I can understand where the government's coming from because you have a Premier who's put no value on education ever. If this was such a great announcement they made, why was the Premier nowhere to be seen?

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You just don't understand, Premier, that the most valuable thing in the global economy is highly trained, highly skilled, healthy people. If you did, you wouldn't let our hope for the future wither.

Don't take it from me—ask Sayed: “I'm waiting to start college this September, and I come from a low-income household. I have been trying to find a job, but it's very hard right now”—right, Premier—“OSAP is my only real hope to afford my education and work toward my dreams. Grants make a huge difference for students like me.”

Speaker, why are the Premier and his party making life so much harder for young people and their families?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I would just remind the member of our \$6.4-billion investment into the sector, which is going to add another 70,000 newly funded seats, and that's on top of the 20,000-funded seats in budget 2025—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Order.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Scarborough–Guildwood will come to order.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The output in funding for our sector has gone from \$5 billion last year to \$7 billion this fall—that's a 30% increase. We're bringing more seats online for our youth to ensure that there is a seat for them at colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes, if that's where they choose to go.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Final supplementary?

Mr. John Fraser: Well, I'm not sure what \$6.2 billion in 2005 would be in 2026 dollars, but I know it is more historic than the historic thing you're talking about.

But it's not about historic; it is actually about what is happening to families. What is happening to families is the Premier is piling on debt, like the finance minister is, to Ontario families every single day. The thing that's going to get us out of this thing is making sure that we have people who can compete in the new economies, in the global economy.

Just don't take it from me—here is a message from Abigail: “The job market is scarce and everything from school to food is getting more expensive on the daily. Money has always been a stressor, and these cuts are making me unsure of how I can pay for my future, something I always have been passionate about.”

Back to the Premier—one answer; that's all I'm asking for today: Why are you making life so much harder for young people and their families in Ontario?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: If the interim leader wants to talk about historic, let's talk about historic increases in tuition under your watch: 83% increase in tuition—that is three times the rate of inflation. Are you proud of that?

Interjections.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: He's ignoring me. But regardless, we're going to continue to be there.

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I hope that member is clarifying to the students that our universities have \$1.8 billion every year of grants that they give out, as well as our enhanced Student Access Guarantee. But I know he's not doing that. He's fearmongering them, Speaker.

The money will still be there for OSAP. If they received OSAP last year, they're going to receive OSAP this fall, so please clarify to the students that the supports will continue to be available for them.

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MPP Tyler Watt: Speaker, my question is for the Premier. Last week, at an OSAP demonstration, I met this awesome high school student named Noah. Noah is the oldest of four and helps care for his grandmother at home with his single mom. Noah has a dream of being a lawyer, but because of this government's cruel changes to OSAP, he's worried that he'll graduate buried in debt. This out-of-touch Conservative government says that there's no money for students like Noah, that it's unsustainable, but somehow, we have enough money for a new convention centre in downtown Toronto or the Premier's fantasy tunnel under the 401.

After eight long years, why is this tired government making life harder and more unaffordable for young people like Noah?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I'm not sure what that member's talking about, about no money—\$6.4 billion is a pretty significant amount of money. Part of that is \$3.3 billion for those high-cost, high-priority programs that our province desperately needs; \$1.7 billion for 70,000 newly funded seats, and that's on top of the \$750 million for 20,000 new STEM seats last year; and \$284 million for small, northern, rural and French institutions—I will remind that member that his party, the Liberal government, called it a no man's land in the north, but we are investing in our northern institutions—as well as \$57 million for Indigenous institutes.

Speaker, \$7 billion is going into operating funding this September. That's an increase of 30% since last year.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I'll remind the leader of the third party to come to order.

Back to the member for Nepean.

MPP Tyler Watt: This minister needs to update his references. He's accusing us of things that were said in the 1990s, honestly.

One of the reasons why I'm here today is because of what this government did to OSAP in 2019. When I was a student nurse, I was one of the students that lost a bunch of OSAP because of your hundreds of millions of dollars of cuts to the program. You tout all these new seats and schools, but you're completely ignoring the fact that it's unaffordable.

I'm asking you again, do you think all of the students outside right now are here to thank you? No, they're here protesting the unaffordability crisis that you've created for them, and they're fighting for their future.

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Speaker, through you to the Premier: Will this out-of-touch government scrap their changes to OSAP and fix OSAP ASAP?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I will remind that member, the only member that's left from 2017 is the interim leader. They ignored the Auditor General—you ignored the Auditor General. Everyone was decimated because the Auditor General understood that it was unsustainable. Speaker, they broke OSAP. We're bringing sustainability back to OSAP.

He knows it. He's not even listening to my answer because they know the reason we have unaffordability is because of the 83% increase in tuition when they were in power. There's not a tax that the Liberals don't like, and tuition is a tax to them.

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Mr. Mike Schreiner: My question is for the Premier. While the Premier talks about spending billions on a tunnel and an island and an airport, people are telling me they are tired—tired of working so hard to make ends meet while the wealthy and well-connected get richer. Now the Premier is piling more debt onto students and their families by cutting OSAP. That's why thousands are on the front lawn today protesting. They understand that these cuts will hurt low- and middle-income families and students the most. Cuts like this are why the rich are getting richer and everyone else is out of luck.

Is an island airport more important than our children's future? Will the Premier reverse his cuts to OSAP?

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Madam Speaker, that's the reason they should never ever be elected again in the history of Ontario. I'll tell you why: The island airport is going to be 2,500 jobs in construction and tens of thousands of jobs in tourism. They don't want it. They'd rather have a little cow pasture there. They want to close down the airport—just close it down—the crown jewel.

Then let's talk about the convention centre. They're all right being in last place in North America. They're all right being in last place in every category there is. We're going to build a world-class convention centre. We are not going to take the back seat to little cities like Baltimore that are eating our lunch because we don't have a proper convention centre. We're going to build a two million square-foot world-class convention centre.

Let's talk about the 401 that goes right up towards your town, and there's congestion that's costing us \$57 billion of lost economic growth because we're absolutely—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for Guelph.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Speaker, that answer shows how the Premier is out of touch with people all across this province. I want to remind the Premier that the province of Ontario is bigger than the city of Toronto.

Families across this province, especially in rural communities, are struggling to get by, pay for housing, pay for groceries, and the Premier is spending billions in Toronto. Meanwhile, students are struggling to pay rent; they're struggling to pay for groceries; they're struggling to pay tuition—all going up because of this government's policies.

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I'm calling on the Premier today, Speaker, to get back in touch with the real affordability crisis that's happening, actually stand up today and look students in the face and tell them he'll reverse his cuts to OSAP because they deserve an affordable future.

Hon. Doug Ford: Thank you to the leader of the Green party. I find it pretty rich, Madam Speaker, that up in his area, in Guelph, Linamar is investing a billion dollars. Do you know why Linda is investing a billion dollars? Because she's told me we've created the environment and the conditions; we have the brightest people; we're graduating 80,000 STEM graduates, going up to 100,000 STEM graduates. That's what we're focused on.

And congratulations: Because of us, Guelph has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the entire province—not because of you—because of the environment we have created. And more and more companies are going to his riding; more and more companies are coming from around the world to invest because we've cut \$12 billion off the backs of the people and off the backs of businesses.

One other point, Madam Speaker—it looks like you're getting up. One other point: Someone said about crime—my member over there. Let's talk about crime. Your federal cousins are—

Interjections.

Special-needs students

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Next, the member for Orléans has given notice of dissatisfaction with the answer to a question given by the Minister of Education. The member has up to five minutes to debate the matter and the minister or parliamentary assistant may reply for up to five minutes.

I recognize the member from Orléans.

Mr. Stephen Blais: I do rise tonight because I was not satisfied with the government's answer on my question about special education from last December, and because families across Ontario still are not getting the support that they need.

Mr. Speaker, for me, this debate started with one child, an 11-year-old girl named Juliet—bright, determined, thriving in French immersion; a child who showed exactly what inclusion can look like when the system works. But this school year, everything changed because the support wasn't there in the classroom. Juliet went from learning alongside her peers to sitting at her desk with colouring sheets—not because she couldn't learn, but because there was no one there to help her. Her father said something to me that should stop all of us in our tracks. He said, "She went from thriving to just being a bum in a seat."

Speaker, that is not education, that is not inclusion and that is not acceptable in Ontario.

Now, something important has happened. After this issue was raised at the Legislature, after that video was shared and seen by hundreds of thousands of Ontarians on social media, Juliet has received the support she needs in her class, and that is an amazing thing. It is absolutely the right outcome. But it raises a bigger question: If the system only works when your story goes viral, then the system is not working. Because for every Juliet whose story is heard, there are countless other children across Ontario still sitting in the classroom without any support, falling behind, being managed instead of being taught—still effectively bums in seats.

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When we talk about this problem, we should be honest about its scale. Ontario's schools are now facing a multi-billion-dollar funding gap—more than \$6 billion since 2018, when you account for inflation and enrolment. In Ottawa alone, the public board has a \$300-million gap. And boards are now spending more on special education than they receive from their government—in some cases, more than 25% above their allocation.

That is the reality behind this Conservative government's rhetoric, and we see the impact every day in classrooms. The funding for a student with special needs often amounts to just a few hours of support per week—not per day, per week—which means, in a real classroom, support is inconsistent, stretched and often simply not there. And that is how a child who can learn ends up colouring in the corner.

This problem is structural, Mr. Speaker. Too much of the funding is based on projections, not on actual, identified needs of the child in front of us. So when the formula misses the mark, the student pays the price. It's not the fault of teachers. It's not the fault of principals. It's not the fault of school boards. They're doing everything they can with what they have. It's a failure of the government to provide resources.

After eight years in government, this is no longer someone else's problem. This is their problem. It's their Conservative government's problem. After eight years, they don't get to say that they're working on it. After eight years, they don't get to say that they just need more time. After eight years, this is their system and these are their results.

We have a government that is looking tired, Mr. Speaker. They're starting to look worn out. They're running out of steam. Because when the same problems keep showing up in our schools, in our health care system, in affordability, it tells you something. It's not a government that's fixing problems. It's a government that is managing decline.

Mr. Speaker, Juliet is back to learning, but our job in this Legislature is not just to fix one case at a time. It's to build a system that works for every child so that no parent in Ontario has to ever say again, "My child is just a bum in a seat."

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for your time. And I would just like to point out that, after over a 100-day absence from the Legislature, it is Ontario Liberals who are here to the end of the night holding the government accountable while the NDP in official opposition have gone home.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I would caution the member on his reference to attendance.

I recognize the member from Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: I want to thank the member opposite for the opportunity to rise tonight to speak to the important issue of special education funding. Because, unlike the member opposite, I believe that facts matter, and the record of this government is clear.

Every single year since 2018, our government has increased education funding. We have increased per-pupil funding by more than 23% and special education funding by over 36%, bringing it to the highest level in Ontario's history. These are not just numbers. This is real, sustained investment in students.

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These investments have supported the hiring of over 4,000 additional educational assistants to help our most vulnerable learners succeed in the classroom. We have also increased annual special education funding to approximately \$3.85 billion, ensuring that students with complex needs are receiving more support than ever before. And, Speaker, we are doing all of this while enrolment has remained stable or declined, meaning more support per student, not less. This is the record of this government: consistent investment, targeted supports and a relentless focus on student success.

But we know that funding alone is not enough. We have also been clear that accountability matters, because every dollar invested must actually reach students in the classroom. This is why we are taking action to ensure school boards remain focused on their core mandate: supporting students, including those with special education needs.

Now, Speaker, let's contrast that with the record of the previous Liberal government. When they were in power, they forced school boards across this province to cut millions in special education funding. This is their legacy: cuts to the very students who need the most support. Liberal cuts and underfunding are why we increased special education funding by almost 40% since 2018. They also oversaw an education system where accountability was weak and where dysfunction too often took priority over student achievement.

Now, we see the same pattern from the opposition today. They continue to defend a status quo where school boards waste resources on internal disputes, mismanagement and priorities that have nothing to do with helping students succeed. We have seen examples across the province where trustee dysfunction has diverted attention away from classrooms and from special education supports.

That's simply unacceptable, because every dollar that is wasted is a dollar that is not going to a child who needs extra help. This is why our government is taking a different approach. This is why we are acting when boards fail to meet their responsibilities.

Speaker, our priority is simple: putting students first. That means ensuring that students with special education needs have access to consistent, high-quality supports no matter where they live. It means supporting teachers with the resources they need in their classrooms. And it means giving parents confidence that the education system is working for their children.

Unlike the opposition, we are focused on outcomes. We believe in an education system that is transparent, accountable and student-centred; an education system where resources are used responsibly; an education system where teachers are supported; and, most importantly, an education system where every single student has the opportunity to succeed.

Speaker, we will continue to make the investments, continue to strengthen the accountability and continue to do the work required to build the best education system in the country, because at the end of the day, we will always put students, parents and teachers first.