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Dear Postsecondary counsellors and colleagues,

As announced in the 2016 Budget, the Ontario government is transforming the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), which is delivered by the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD). A Joint Steering Committee made up of First Nations representatives, Chiefs of Ontario (COO) staff and MAESD was struck in February 2017 to work collaboratively to assist all parties in gaining a clear understanding of the scope and potential impacts, challenges and barriers related to supporting and accessing the new OSAP by First Nations learners and sponsoring agencies.

Both COO and MAESD want to help ensure that all First Nations learners understand and have an opportunity to discuss the benefits and challenges of the new OSAP. The Joint Steering Committee is engaging in collaborative work in two ways: firstly, ensuring First Nations learners, their families and communities understand how the new OSAP can financially support them in postsecondary education; and secondly, determining the unique barriers to postsecondary education that many First Nations learners face so that we can work towards solutions to address those barriers through further changes to OSAP.

Starting in the 2017-18 academic year, the government will replace most existing Ontario grants and tuition tax credits with a single up-front grant, the new OSAP. The improvements to OSAP start for the 2017-18 school year, and further enhancements will be made for the 2018-19 school year. The application for the new OSAP was released on March 29, 2017.

Currently, all learners, including First Nations learners, can access the "grant-only" portion of OSAP, without having to take on a loan. This benefits students who choose not to take on debt and allows them to have the option of taking the grant portion, loan portion or both.

The new OSAP includes a number of changes specific to First Nations learners, including the treatment of funding from other sources. In November 2016, the federal government announced that it would not expect a student contribution from learners who self-identify as Indigenous, and that funding received from the Post-secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) would be exempt as a resource within the federal portion of the OSAP need assessment.

On April 27, 2017, Ontario announced through Budget 2017 that it would match the federal commitment to Indigenous learners, exempting PSSSP as a resource in the OSAP assessment, and waiving the expected student contribution for Indigenous learners. These changes will make it easier for First Nations learners to access PSSSP and OSAP funding together; therefore, improving access to postsecondary education.

The Joint Steering Committee is developing communication materials to provide clarity on the upcoming transformation and how this will impact First Nations learners. Information sharing sessions were held in various locations across Ontario during May, 2017. The information sharing sessions provided an opportunity for First Nation representatives involved in supporting their community members in postsecondary education to obtain clarity on OSAP and the ensuing changes. The sessions also gave an opportunity for First Nations to provide guidance and input for MAESD to consider in effectively addressing the unique needs of First Nation students, communities, institutions and organizations.

For more information on OSAP, we invite you to visit the OSAP Partners Resource page available online at www.ontario.ca/OSAPpartners. In addition, Sherry Britton, Program Administrator, is available to answer further questions for Education Counsellors. Sherry can be reached by phone at 807-343-7288 or via email at Sherry.britton@ontario.ca. COO will also be posting a link to all resources on the COO Education Portal.

COO and MAESD look forward to working with you as well as working together to further improve student aid in Ontario so that it can provide even better support to Indigenous learners.

Sincerely,



Isadore Day
Ontario Regional Chief



Deb Matthews
Deputy Premier
Minister of Advanced Education and
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Minister Responsible for Digital
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