

DATE: January 23, 2024

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Independent Student Funding
(Response to Request for Information #017)

ORIGINATOR: Todd Burnstad, Chief Financial Officer

RESOURCE STAFF: Husna Foda, Bob Morter

REFERENCE: November 7, 2023 Board meeting (Trustee Estabrooks)
[Government of Alberta Student Aid](#)
[Alberta Education Funding Manual](#)
[Education Act](#)

ISSUE

At the November 7, 2023, Board Meeting, Trustee Estabrooks requested the following information

- Could Administration please define what is meant by the term “independent student”.
- Please provide a breakdown of the number of independent students who are enrolled with the division by age, and in which year they are currently enrolled.
- What are some of the challenges that independent students face in accessing education?
- How does the Division help independent students apply for additional government supports? What has the provincial government, either through the Education and/or Advanced Education Ministries shared with the Division about the Foundational Learning Assistance Program including total funding available for students to cover basics such as food and rent under this program and number of independent students funded annually? Are we aware of any increased demand for this program or changes in overall funding from previous years?
- How could a lack of access to funding impact independent students who attend EPSB after September 30?

CURRENT SITUATION

Could Administration please define what is meant by the term “independent student”.

The criteria used to define an independent student is different between Alberta Student Aid and the *Education Act*.

Alberta Student Aid distinguishes between independent and dependent students to help determine residency, eligibility for Canada Student Loan Program funding, and eligibility for grants.

Students are considered independent by Alberta Student Aid when, as of the study period start date on their application, they:

- are a single student with a dependent child (e.g. single parent, guardian),

- are (or have been) married or in a common-law relationship,
- have been out of regular high school for more than four years,
- are 23 years of age or older, or
- have been available to the labour force full-time for two periods of twelve consecutive months. These two periods need not be consecutive.

However, there are circumstances where a dependent student may be considered an independent student by the Minister for purposes of determining the student's residency and financial eligibility for different types of funding.

Special Independent Status is granted when one of the following circumstances exist:

- a single student has financial responsibility for a wholly dependent individual such as a disabled or elderly family member,
- both parents are deceased, or
- a student is a current or former youth in government care:
 - If the student is 18 years of age or older as of the study period start date on their application and on the day before their 18th birthday was in the custody of the Director under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, the subject of a temporary or permanent guardianship order, a permanent guardianship agreement, or another order under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act or equivalent legislation in another jurisdiction.
 - If the student is under 18 years of age as of the study period start date on their application and is in the custody of the Director under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, the subject of a temporary or permanent guardianship order, a permanent guardianship agreement, or another order under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act or equivalent legislation in another jurisdiction.

If none of the above circumstances apply, Special Independent Status may be granted if there is a significant breakdown in the student's relationship with the student's parents. The following documentation is required:

- a letter from the student that outlines the family circumstances, and
- a letter from a third-party professional (e.g., social worker, psychologist, high school counselor, etc.) corroborating the circumstances.

Students who are approved for Special Independent Status will be treated as independent students for all future applications.

By contrast, Section 1(1)(n) of the *Education Act* defines an "independent student" as a student who is:

- (i) 18 years of age or older, or
- (ii) 16 years of age or older and:
 - (A) living independently as determined by a board in accordance with section 6 [of the *Education Act*], or
 - (B) a party to an agreement under section 57.2 of the [Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act](#).

Therefore, any student enrolled in the Division who is 18 years of age or older is automatically classified as an independent student by default. However, being an independent student as defined in the *Education Act* does not qualify them for any of the funding from Alberta Student Aid unless they meet the criteria set out by Alberta Student Aid.

Please provide a breakdown of the number of independent students who are enrolled with the division by age, and in which year they are currently enrolled.

As at October 26, 2023, the Division had 92 students that were aged 16 or 17 who met the *Education Act's* definition of independent student, and 3023 students who were aged 18 and older (automatically defaulted to be classified as independent because of their age). The Division has no way of knowing if any of these students meet the Alberta Student Aid definition of independent student and were, or are receiving financial aid from Alberta Student Aid.

What are some of the challenges that independent students face in accessing education?

Education funding is provided directly to the Division for students that meet the definition of 'student' as outlined in the Alberta Education Funding Manual. This includes eligible independent students as long as they are less than 20 years of age on September one of the school year. Administration is not able to comment on challenges that might be experienced by independent students, as these would be unique to the individual student.

How does the Division help independent students apply for additional government supports?

Students who require any assistance are encouraged to contact their school to discuss potential support. Administration confirmed with schools that staff from their Student Services departments have helped students with attempting to secure funding in the past.

What has the provincial government, either through the Education and/or Advanced Education Ministries shared with the division about the Foundational Learning Assistance Program including total funding available for students to cover basics such as food and rent under this program and number of independent students funded annually? Are we aware of any increased demand for this program or changes in overall funding from previous years?

Administration is not aware of any information about the Foundational Learning Assistance Program being shared with the Division including funding, the number of students in the program, or demand for the program.

How could a lack of access to funding impact independent students who attend EPSB after September 30?

Administration is not able to comment or speculate on the potential impact to students. It is important to make the distinction between student funding and Division funding. The count date, Division funding, and whether the student receives funding, student aid, are not linked.

KEY POINTS

Administration recommends referring to the [Government of Alberta Student Aid website](#) for clarification or additional information about the program and the resources that are available to students seeking Independent status or financial aid.

TB:ja