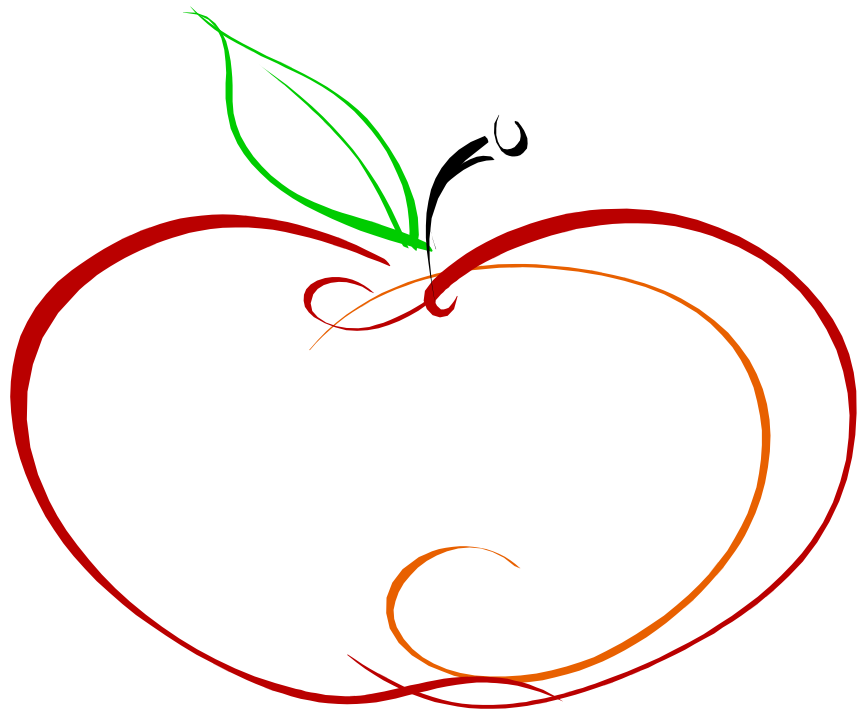


# MAKING THE GRADE



Election  
2009

An all party report card on higher education



The Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations (ANSSA) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization representing over 35,000 students at five post-secondary institutions across the Province of Nova Scotia. ANSSA's mandate focuses exclusively on post-secondary education, and is committed to advocating for a high quality system that is accessible and affordable to every qualified student.

### ANSSA Member Associations include:

- Cape Breton University Students' Union
- St. Francis Xavier University Students' Union
- Dalhousie Student Union
- Saint Mary's University Students' Association
- Acadia University Students' Union

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## INTRODUCTION

ANSSA believes that investing in Nova Scotians is one of the most effective ways of ensuring the long term prosperity of our province. During these troubled economic times our province faces great challenges: an aging population, the outmigration of youth, an uncertain economic future, environmental crises, a strained health care system, and the threat of a retiring workforce. These are just some of the issues facing our province. ANSSA believes the best way to meet and overcome the challenges of tomorrow is to invest in a higher education system that is accessible and affordable to every Nova Scotian and of the highest quality. While efforts have been made in recent years to reduce the financial burden on students, Nova Scotia retains its decade old title of being the most expensive Canadian province in which to pursue a university education.

### Evaluation Criteria

ANSSA based its' evaluations of the parties off of a series of public recommendations made to the parties at the beginning of the election campaign. This report card uses those recommendations as primary evaluation criteria. Those **recommendations** were:

- The initiation of a holistic review of the post-secondary education system in the province. The results of such a review would be used for the development of a master plan for higher education in Nova Scotia.
- The implementation of an access guarantee to ensure that any academically qualified student is not prevented from pursuing a post-secondary education due to financial barriers alone.
- The provision of financial support to deal with the infrastructure deficit of over \$543 Million Accumulated Deferred Maintenance projects at universities across Nova Scotia
- To actively work with other provinces and the federal government for the creation of a Pan-Canadian Accord on post-secondary education.

ANSSA also places a large value on the commitments of the parties to maintain valuable programs and initiatives introduced by the current government. ANSSA applauds the current government for introducing the tuition freeze and reductions program, and new student financial aid measures, but it should be noted that the only criteria used in evaluating the parties will be the willingness expressed by all parties to maintain those programs and introduce new measures for student assistance and university funding.

ANSSA standing policy and previous ANSSA publications and statements were also used to evaluate proposals in the lobby document, but were not the primary criteria for our evaluation.

### Grading System

Each party received a letter grade using the following criteria:

- A – Platform makes commitment to implement all recommendations
- B – Platform makes commitment to implement most recommendations
- C – Platform makes commitments to implement some recommendations
- D – Platform makes commitment to implement only few recommendations
- F – Platform does not make any commitment to implement recommendations

## GREEN PARTY OF NOVA SCOTIA

GRADE: D

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### PLAN

The Green Party of Nova Scotia has made the following platform commitments that will affect the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia:

- Calls for a full evaluation of post-secondary student financing which would encompass:
  - The effects of student debt on the long-term financial security of graduates and the province
  - A cost-benefit analysis of additional funding directed to lower tuition at Nova Scotia's universities.

### ANALYSIS

The Green Party's call for a full evaluation of post-secondary student financing is welcomed by ANSSA, but falls short of the comprehensive review of post-secondary education being called for by ANSSA which ANSSA hopes would encompass such an evaluation as well.

A cost-benefit analysis of tuition levels is welcomed, but ANSSA notes that the Green Party has not made any commentary on the accessibility of a post-secondary education. High tuition levels are troubling for all students, but for many, even with a lowered tuition, education may remain inaccessible.

It should be noted that the Green Party calls for a comprehensive public education strategy of the P-12 system which partially echoes the type of strategy ANSSA is looking to see at the post-secondary level. This strategy vaguely addresses the importance of early outreach to ensure students are aware of the opportunities available to them.

The Green Party is the only party to refrain from commentary on university infrastructure spending promises outlined in the 2009 Budget and the current government's tuition freeze and reduction plan.

Unfortunately, the Green Party platform fails to make any tangible commitments to post-secondary education, institutions or to students to address many of the problems in our post-secondary education system that we already know how to solve. For this reason, the Green Party places last in ANSSA's report card.

## NOVA SCOTIA LIBERAL PARTY

GRADE: B-

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### PLAN

The Liberal Party of Nova Scotia has made the following platform commitments that will affect the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia:

- Expand the Options and Opportunities program to every high school in the province, along with several other early learning initiatives.
- Initiate a comprehensive review of our entire post-secondary education system.
- Support and promote the development of post-secondary research parks to bridge the gaps between public research and private sector development
- Maintain the long term commitment to reduce tuition to the national average by 2011
- Work with everyone involved – Nova Scotia's universities, our federal counterparts and the private sector – to address the infrastructure deficit. A liberal government will also develop a long term strategy to improve the quality of our educational infrastructure.
- A Liberal government will pay the tuition of 100 medical students over 5 years who agree to practice in underserved communities

### ANALYSIS

The plan introduced by the Liberal party exhibits the most comprehensive and detailed vision for post-secondary education in our province compared to any of the other parties.

The expansion of the Options and Opportunities program to every high school in Nova Scotia will improve the accessibility of our post-secondary system by increasing awareness about the realities of a post secondary education. The Liberals have committed to increase the funding to the program in order to reach every eligible high school in the province. Several other early learning initiatives are introduced in the liberal platform, all of which may contribute to the reduction of access barriers to post-secondary education that currently exist.

The commitment to conduct a comprehensive review of post-secondary education is the distinguishing feature of this platform, which ANSSA supports wholeheartedly and strongly encourages other parties to adopt.

The willingness to address the infrastructure deficit is welcomed by ANSSA, it should however be noted that there is no costing for the Liberal party's plans for university infrastructure funding.

ANSSA recognizes the development of post-secondary research parks as a strategy that may aid the province in retaining graduates, attracting researchers, and developing the knowledge economy. However, where ANSSA's primary concerns are improving the affordability, accessibility and quality of our post-secondary education system, this proposal has not contributed to the grade in this proposal.

Free tuition for medical students willing to work where they're needed is an interesting retention tool. Depending on how the program is implemented, it has the potential to drastically improve the accessibility of our one medical school for qualified students who would otherwise be forced into debt or not continue their studies.

## NOVA SCOTIA NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY

GRADE: C

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### PLAN

The New Democratic Party of Nova Scotia has made the following commitments that will affect the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia:

- Provide up to \$15,000 to university graduates who stay and build a life here in Nova Scotia. The financial aid will take the form of a tax credit available for up to six years after graduation at a value of up to \$2, 500 annually.
- Creation of 250 new seats at the Nova Scotia Community College for in-demand trades and professions.
- Honor the university infrastructure spending promises as outlined in the 2009 Budget tabled by the current government<sup>1</sup>
- Maintain the current government's commitment to reduce tuition to the national average by 2011<sup>2</sup>

### ANALYSIS

ANSSA is encouraged by the value of the proposed graduate tax credit, but does not see this as a responsible use of money earmarked for post-secondary education. Back-end tax credits are unproven retention tools being proposed by both the NDP and the PCs, but ignore the fact that many students are driven away from the province by high tuition levels before even beginning their education here. For instance, the number of Nova Scotia students enrolled at Memorial University in Newfoundland has increased by almost 1,400 per cent between 1997 and 2007<sup>3</sup>, a province notable for its remarkably low tuition levels and recent improvements in student financial assistance.

While back-end tax credits might retain graduates, they do nothing to remove up-front barriers facing students who cannot afford to attend one of our universities in the first place. The NDP have costed this component of their plan at \$6.5 Million in the first year. An investment such as this could have a much greater effect on the accessibility of our post-secondary system if delivered to students at an earlier point in their post-secondary studies – needs based grants for underrepresented groups and the expansion of existing grants programs and are some of the many alternatives that ANSSA is supportive of.

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, Amy. 2009. Dexter says he'd keep Tory promises. Retrieved on 13 May 2009 from <<http://thechronicleherald.ca/Election/1121731.html>>

<sup>2</sup> While not explicitly mentioned in the NDP platform, ANSSA has received written assurance from Darryl Dexter's Chief of Staff, Dan O'Connor that an NDP government would honor the current government's plan for freezing and reducing tuition to the national average.

<sup>3</sup>CBC Radio. 2008. On The Go. Accessed on 9 May 2009 from <[http://www.cbc.ca/onthegeo/media/20080930hatcher\\_127111.ram](http://www.cbc.ca/onthegeo/media/20080930hatcher_127111.ram)>

The creation of 250 new seats at Nova Scotia Community College campuses has the potential to increase the accessibility of higher education for many youth and mature students. ANSSA applauds this effort.

ANSSA was encouraged by the NDP's implementation of a student access guarantee as party policy, but is disappointed that the policy is not evident in the party's election platform. The lack of detail and comprehensive vision presented in this section of the NDP platform is also discouraging.

## NOVA SCOTIA PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

GRADE: C-

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### PLAN<sup>4</sup>

The Progressive Conservative Party of Nova Scotia has made the following commitments that will affect the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia:

- Expansion of the Options and Opportunities program to additional grades in sixteen schools with a \$759 000 investment
- Introduction and continued commitment to tuition freeze and reduction plan
- Investment of an additional \$114 Million for maintenance and upgrades to university and community college campuses
- Continued expansion of seats at the Nova Scotia Community Colleges
- Extension of the time limit on using the graduate tax credit from three to five years, providing savings of up to \$2, 000 on provincial income tax payable for those who stay and work here at home
- Parents would receive a non-refundable tax credit to match registered education savings plan investments, to a maximum of \$1,000.00 made in the first year of their child's life

### ANALYSIS

ANSSA applauds the efforts, while not perfect, of the current government in introducing a tuition freeze, a tuition reduction plan, a new up-front grants program and several other student assistance efforts. Although the government's initiatives have not been perfect, the emphasis on higher education has been long overdue. Unfortunately, for the Progressive Conservative party, this report card is about the future, not the past.

Like the Liberals, the Progressive Conservatives are committed to expanding the Options and Opportunities program, but not to the extent that the Liberal party plans to. While the Progressive Conservatives have planned a \$759 000 investment this year, expanding the program in only sixteen schools, this would leave many high school students in the province without access to such a program. `

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<sup>4</sup> \*Note: ANSSA's evaluation of the PC Party was based on the 2009 Nova Scotia budget they introduced in the legislature and public statements made throughout the election campaign.

The Progressive Conservatives' plan to extend the time limit on the graduate tax credit is a much smaller investment in retention of graduates than that put forth by the NDP, and continues to allocate funding at the wrong end of a student's university career.

The tax-credit for RESPs should be seen for what it is, and that is a tool that will primarily help middle and upper income families save for an education they can already afford. Such a credit will do nothing to help those students and families currently unable to afford an education, invest in RESPs, or benefit from a tax credit.

While Liberals and New Democrats both outlined plans for the next four years, the Progressive Conservatives have chosen to use their 2009 Budget as a platform, leaving groups like ours to question what happens in the final three years of their prospective term in office.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

ANSSA applauds the Liberal, New Democratic and Progressive Conservative parties for their commitment to the continuation of the tuition freeze and reduction plan, and to honor the university infrastructure spending commitments put forth in the 2009 Budget of the current government. While the Green Party has failed to make any tangible commitments on post-secondary education, ANSSA welcomes their recognition of high tuition and high debt as being potentially detrimental to the provinces long term prosperity.

It is disappointing; however, that Post Secondary Education has not been a more central feature of any platforms during this election. The parties have tiptoed around important issues like accessibility to education. While the Liberal Party grades the highest in this report card, no party has introduced a plan that recognizes and seeks to fix all of the challenges and barriers our universities and students will continue to face.

From this point forward, ANSSA will continue to urge all party leaders to commit to conducting a comprehensive review of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia, and to move quickly towards implementing an access guarantee that will ensure no student is denied the right to a higher education for financial reasons alone. Additionally, ANSSA is urging all party leaders to commit to working with other provinces and the federal government on a pan-Canadian accord and dedicated funding transfer on post-secondary education, but notes that the absence of such an accord should not be reason enough for an abdication of responsibility for properly funding our universities and our students.

## SUMMARY OF GRADES

- Green Party of Nova Scotia: D
- Nova Scotia Liberal Party: B-
- Nova Scotia New Democratic Party: C
- Progressive Conservative Party of Nova Scotia: C-