

Students to hit "debt wall" in two years

BY DAVID COCHRANE

OTTAWA (CUP) — The federal government has finally admitted that student debt has reached crisis levels. And the government predicts

that in under two years students will be overwhelmed by debt, igniting sharper increases in bankruptcies and student loan defaults.

The Department of Human Resources Development is

projecting that by 1998-99, student debt levels will grow too large for a post-secondary graduate making an average income to keep up with monthly payments on that debt.

In 1998-99, the average debt incurred while obtaining a four-year undergraduate degree will be \$25,000, burying the average graduate salary of \$30,000, department officials told a parliamentary committee earlier this month.

"Debt levels of \$25,000 are starting to approach debt-to-income ratios that are troubling in terms of the individual's capacity to cover the debts," Martha Nixon, chief manager of the Canada Student Loans Program, told the committee.

By 1998-99, the average graduate will have to spend more than 25 per cent of their disposable income — based on an annual salary of \$30,000 — just to meet minimum monthly payments on their student loan.

"We are certainly signalling that we are certainly aware that there is a problem," Nixon said.

Student groups have been warning of the dangers of rising student debt for years, and Brad Lavigne, chair of the Canadian Federation of Students, says he is wondering why it took the federal government so long to wake up to reality.

"It's what we've been saying all along," he said. "The problem is they have waited too long to notice. Right now it's a crisis."

Last year, almost 12,000 students defaulted on their loans, four times the amount that experienced repayment problems in 1990. In that same period, student debt levels have almost tripled.

This year alone, 540,000 students nation-wide received loans that were at least partially funded by the federal government.

Nixon told the Commons committee that debt and chronic youth underemployment are contributing to the bankruptcy and student loan defaults.

But Lavigne blames federal cuts in transfer payments to the provinces — slashed by \$2.29-billion since the 1995 federal budget — and government inaction for creating the problem. The federation says the government should create a system of national grants and freeze tuition fees to help the problem in the short term and eventually work towards the elimination of all educational costs.

Canada's other national student organization, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA), says

Ottawa is only now showing signs of recognizing the student debt problem because it has become a major priority for the Canadian public.

Hoops Harrison, the association's national director, says the government has also been better alerted to the problem by changes in the way educational groups are now lobbying the federal government.

"There has also been a more concentrated effort by groups to make statistical arguments rather than rhetorical arguments," Harrison said. "That quite often gets a better response within the bureaucracy."

The federal government continues to say the student debt problem is an important issue, but generally stops short of publicly offering any concrete solutions or proposals.

"The situation of the student debt is a very, very important one because it is beginning to deprive some students access to education. This is a priority for a government like ours," Pierre Pettigrew, minister of Human Resources Development, told reporters recently.

Pettigrew's department is expected to suggest some solutions to the Liberal cabinet sometime in December.

Teacher begins fast to stop Bill 160

BY SARAH SCHMIDT

TORONTO (CUP) — An Ontario religion teacher has begun fasting in an attempt to halt the provincial government's education bill which he characterizes as draconian and unjust.

Finding sanctuary in Trinity-St. Paul's United Church — a congregation known for its social justice work, located just west of the University of Toronto, Gary Connolly's fast officially began at an evening religious service November 23.

"It's not I, it's we," the veteran religion teacher at Robert F. Hall Catholic school in Mississauga, a city just outside Metro Toronto, told the church full of supporters.

"We are here to attempt to speak to the truth about Bill 160, to challenge not only our government policy markers around Bill 160, but to look at the power of the bottom line.

"We need to break the concept of the bottom line," Connolly said, emphasizing that youth will get trampled underneath this line if the controversial legislation is passed.

He added that the education restructuring bill is just one in a series of moves against the disenfranchised by Mike Harris' government.

After the congregation voted unanimously to open its doors to the fasting teacher earlier in the day, the church's minister lent her unequivocal support at the service.

"This is a problem in our backyard, but it's also a larger problem," Joan Wyatt said. "And we seek a different vision."

Connolly, the father of two who weighs approximately 125 pounds, will remain at the church for the duration of the fast.

Brenda Holtkamp, the chaplain at Connolly's school, says she came to show her support for her colleague. She says the act of fasting, which enjoys a rich tradition in many faiths, is about bringing injustices to light, in order to right them.

Connolly began his fast just days after fellow religion teacher Dwyer Sullivan ended his five-day sit-in in the office of the education minister. Sullivan, along with three colleagues from the Toronto Board of Education, spent a weekend camped out in Dave Johnson's office.

Sullivan says he is fully supportive of Connolly's faith-based action.

"Fasting to me calls upon each of us to do what is right. For this, I am tremendously supportive," said the 36-year veteran teacher at St. Benedict Catholic school in Cambridge.

"Fasting, as a way to bring justice, may be a last recourse. Teachers have tried everything else," Sullivan said.

"The 82 Tories have to look within themselves, at the deepest consequence," he added, alluding to one of Ghandi's practices (if he looked in the eyes of the poor and the action hurt them, he abandoned that route).

Daily services are being held at the church for Connolly's supporters.

Bill 160 could pass as early as Thursday. Connolly's fast continues indefinitely.

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