



The Real Cost of School in 2025

Back to School Survey Report
August 2025


Barnardos
Because childhood lasts a lifetime



Back to School 2025

Introduction

For over 20 years Barnardos has been campaigning to reduce back to school costs, in order to reduce financial pressure facing parents across the country. Budget 2023 introduced free schoolbooks to all primary school children, Budget 2024 to all pupils in junior cycle and then extended to all pupils last year in Budget 2025. Also, in Budget 2025 the Government expanded the eligibility of the hot school meals programme to all primary schools along with a welcome increase to the capitation grant from €200 to €224 per student in primary schools and from €345 to €386 per student in post-primary schools, starting September 2025.

However, many parents still remain concerned about several back to school costs, in particular in relation to uniforms, voluntary contributions and for secondary school parents the increasing cost of digital devices. The 2025 Barnardos Back to School Report considers these issues and other back to school financial pressures on parents and families as their children return to education in September, reflecting some shared views and findings from our [Cost of Living](#) report published last month.

It is important the Government continues the positive momentum and builds on recent actions to provide a truly free education. Barnardos calls on the government to prioritise these steps:

- 1. Expand eligibility to back to school allowance**
- 2. Continue to increase capitation rate to reduce reliance on voluntary contributions and introduce a voluntary fund code of practice**
- 3. Reduce the cost of digital devices schools placed on parents**
- 4. Continue to promote affordable uniform options**

Methodology

Each year, Barnardos undertakes an online survey of parents to find out the costs they will incur for their child returning to education in September. A link to the survey is shared with the public and our supporters¹ through various channels, primarily email and social media.

This year the survey was live from the 1st to the 29th July inclusive. A total of 830 responses were received. These responses represented the costs associated with 497 primary school pupils

¹ Individuals who have agreed to receive information from the organisation.



and 333 secondary school students. The costs examined in the survey comprise the basics required for returning to school, such as schoolbooks, school uniforms, classroom resources, digital technology and voluntary contributions, as well as school tours and trips.

Demographics

Survey respondents came from a cross-section of Irish society, with a representative geographic spread, covering all counties across the country.

Respondents covered all classes and years within the primary and secondary school cycles², with approximately one third in Deis and two thirds in non-Deis schools. 60% of parents classified the area they live in to be urban with 40% saying rural.

Two thirds of parents said they were living in married couples and just under one in five (17%) being one parent households.

Back to school costs

"When school starts I've paid over a thousand euro for everything. But then in the first few weeks, letters sent home asking for €20 euro for a locker, €20 euro for a lock, €25 euro for insurance. It just never ends"(Secondary School Parent)

*"All the cost that sending my child to school involves is too much for parents with the cost of living at the moment. Sending your child to school shouldn't be an issue or a struggle for any parent. We should only worry about our kids settling and being happy and not about if we can afford the uniform or not."
(Primary School Parent)*

Results from our survey continue to show that parents are concerned about meeting costs this year. Half of primary (50%) and 60% of secondary school parents stated they are worried about meeting these costs, (13% of primary school parents and 19% of secondary school parents said they were very concerned). Only one third (34%) of secondary school parents said that costs were manageable. 6% of secondary and 2% of primary school parents said they simply would not be able to meet costs.

"We won't have enough money for all of it. I can't afford the costs for my kids." (Primary School Parent)

² The profile of respondents was found to closely match the general population for most areas, such as employment, educational attainment and family composition.



Paying for back to school costs

"I will not pay gas and electric bill in August, I will borrow a loan and use klarna and humm to get as much as I can for back to school items. I will go into debt until March the following year until it's all paid back, then it repeats again in August. My worries are if I can keep this up year after year"

(Secondary School Parent)

Costs for parents³ - €	2025	2024
Uniforms		
Primary	€125	€119
Secondary	€199	€211
Voluntary contribution		
Primary	€87	€98
Secondary	€133	€124
Classroom resources⁴		
Primary	€51	€51
Secondary	€74	€69
School tours and trips		
Primary	€64	€65
Secondary	€144	€151

³ In producing our costed figures above we combine costs parents tell us and produce the average amount spent on each item.

⁴ 24% of primary and 32% of secondary school parents said they did not have to contribute anything towards classroom resources



Extra-curricular activities within school⁵		
Primary	€84	€87
Secondary	€110	€113
Digital Costs ⁶		
Primary	€147	
Secondary	€430	

Parents were asked how they planned to meet back to school costs this year. Just over one quarter of secondary (27%) and 14% primary school parents said they have to use **savings** in order to meet back to school costs. 15% of secondary and one in ten (8%) of primary school parents said they had to **take a loan out or borrow** from family and friends to meet school costs.

Parents discussed having to go without or cut back on other essentials to meet the costs, while others said they would simply have to forego paying certain other bills. One of the biggest difficulties some parents have with the costs is the fact they all come together in a very short period of time, placing additional financial pressure on them and their household budget.

"My regular bills are not going to be paid in order to meet back to school costs" (Secondary School Parent)

"The cost of the uniforms and all the supplies at once means we have no expendable income for the month - we are on a very tight budget as we have three kids" (Primary School Parent)

"With no support, back to school means buying lots of things and paying many fees. We can do it, but it's definitely going to make a dent in our budget and we'll have to cut back in other ways to make it work"
(Primary School Parent)

⁵ 29% of primary and 50% of secondary parents said they did not have pay for extra-curricular activities within school

⁶ 49% of secondary and only 9% of primary school parents said that their schools required digital costs. Figures are not comparable for digital costs in previous years as introduced a more robust measurement this year, which required a slight change in question.



"That my son will not have any break (holiday) in summer months due to saving from my weekly monies to pay for school expenses. He deserves a break as he attends school all year and we always have no money for down time."

(Secondary School Parent)

"Everything has gone so expensive, I'm going to have to skip paying some bills to be able to afford everything" (Primary School Parent)

"I juggle finances all of the time. I worry that I will not be able to afford utility bills in Sept/Oct to cover school costs. I have credit card debt which will increase in August. I'll clear this by Christmas and then use the Credit card for that" (Secondary School Parent)

"Overall household expenses have increased and therefore I don't have the same amount saved before the kids return to school" (Primary School Parent)

"All costs coming in a short period of time. Unexpected costs in the first weeks of September if asked for new contributions etc." (Primary School Parent)

"It's a huge amount of money all at once but very hard to save for over the year." (Secondary School Parent)

No parent should face additional stress and financial pressure to ensure their child has all they need to start back to school. The Government has reduced some expenses but there is an opportunity to do more to reduce costs for parents. Below we set out costs for specific years within primary and secondary school.

Costs for parents 2025 (2024) - €	4th class	1st year	5th year
Uniforms	€116	€197	€185
School trips and tours	€64	€142	€164
Digital tools*	€300	€464	€394
Classroom resources*	€56	€72	€72
Voluntary contributions*	€93	€123	€141



Extra-curricular activities in school	€96	€115	€120
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* Average amount of those who were asked to pay digital costs, classroom resources, extra-curricular activities and voluntary contributions this year.

Uniforms

Parents highlighted they are still spending large sums on expensive uniforms, which due to growing children, they often have to replace during the course of the year. On average, primary school parents spent €125 on uniforms and secondary school parents spent €199 this year⁷.

When asked about whether or not they were worried about meeting the cost of uniforms this year, 58% of primary school parents said they were worried (12% very worried) and 72% of secondary school parents expressed worry (17% were very worried). These numbers are down considerably on last year and could reflect the impact free schoolbooks is having.

74% of primary school and 92% of secondary school parents who responded said their children had to wear crested/branded uniforms. Only 13% of primary and 4% of secondary school parents said their children had plain uniforms and 13% (primary)/4% (secondary) said their child had no uniform. Only one third (34%) of primary school parents said their school offered an affordable uniform option with only 14% of secondary school parents saying the same. 86% of primary and 92% of secondary school parents said they believed that their school should provide an affordable uniform option.

The biggest problem parents had with uniforms was having to buy expensive crested items instead of generic clothing; children growing through uniforms and in particular shoes quickly during the course of the school year; and the fact many school have tracksuits as well as day to day uniforms and parents had to buy them both. What parents said:

"School trainers are getting more expensive every time I purchase, regardless of sizes"
(Primary School Parent)

"Being able to afford all the uniform bits for her. She grew so quickly over the last year I ran

⁷ 70% of primary school parents and three quarters (74%) of secondary school parents, felt costs had gone up from last year. 28% of primary and 21% of secondary school parents said the amount had stayed the same.



out of uniforms that fit and couldn't get them towards the end of the school year (from Feb they were too small). I need to buy sizes for now and sizes bigger but the cost is crippling" (Primary School Parent)

"I have two boys in primary school, they each require two different types of uniform, sports and formal. I feel this is an unnecessary financial burden for parents, and there should be a choice to buy one or both." (Primary School Parent)

"The specific uniform is tracksuit and formal uniform uncomfortable why can't it just be the tracksuit and not both, it's too expensive" (Secondary School Parent)

"She needs a tracksuit that won't fit her properly (cannot buy bottoms separate must come as package, blouse that is an extortionate price and cannot be sourced in local shop, she needs multiple skirts/jumpers, and a coat that is not suitable for autumn/spring." (Secondary School Parent)

"The shoes, I need to buy them every 2 months uniforms 3 to 4 times a year. He makes holes or broke them on regular basic" (Primary School Parent)

There are clearly schools taking progressive action to reduce cost and financial pressure on parents around school uniforms. One parent for example discussed how her child's school organises second hand uniform sales twice a year, encouraging parents to reduce their costs considerably. This year there were more parents highlighting their school doing swap schemes or second-hand pop-up shops which made a big difference.

"None, only because our school did a uniform swap shop and I got my child's full uniform for free here, this was a huge savings for us" (Primary School Parent)

However, too many schools are requiring parents to spend what they see as unnecessarily large amounts on uniforms, putting additional pressure on their finances. This is despite the 2017 Department of Education Circular that schools should reduce the costs associated with uniforms by opting for iron or sew on crests on school uniforms and wherever possible, requiring generic rather than branded items, including uniforms.

The solution

Affordable uniforms

The Department of Education's Circular on affordable uniforms is not being enforced. The Department should introduce an affordable uniform charter for schools to sign up to that would amalgamate and build on existing best practice and sustainable programmes, helping schools learn from each other.



Back to School Allowance

The Department of Social Protection provides support to help with the cost of sending children to school through the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA). This allowance is available to families on a low income such as those in receipt of a social welfare payment (including Working Family Payment) or taking part in approved employment schemes and recognised education and training courses.

Twenty percent of primary and 21% of secondary school parents said they received the back to school allowance. Although parents expressed gratitude for the payment and the difference it makes, 82% of secondary and 73% of primary school parents said it does not cover the cost of uniform and footwear through the year.

"I'm broke and already in debt and back to school allowance does not cover the costs"
(Secondary School Parent)

"The back to school does not cover costs for everything, taken into account, fees, uniform plus tracksuit and shoes total for secondary school easily would be €500" (Secondary School Parent)

"Have always used full back to school allowance in past to cover main back to school costs, had to use it to catch up on cost of living debts this year"
(Primary School Parent)

"Again this year many parents who did not meet the threshold for the payment felt they had been unfairly left without any supports for significant cost."
(Secondary School Parent)

"I am very worried because I don't get back to school allowance and I have a new-born of 4 months old, another son going to 4th class" (Primary School Parent)

"As a 2 family working parents household we do not qualify for any subsidy towards school costs. Having 3 children the costs are a lot and we really have to budget for the schools costs. Back to school allowance should be reviewed and given to all families" (Primary School Parent)

The Solution

Amend the thresholds for qualifying for the Allowance to allow more families who are currently struggling financially but not entitled to it due to having slightly too high-income levels.



Classroom Resources

"The classroom photocopy and stationary fees that started at €40 three years ago and are now €75+ despite being able to obtain these items for much less myself but being forced to comply"
(Primary School Parent)

Barnardos welcomed the rollout of free schoolbooks to all primary and secondary schools since its implementation in 2023. It has made a real difference to families across the country, with parents repeatedly commenting on what a huge benefit it has been and the fact it has helped reduce some financial pressure on them.

However, many schools do still require parents to pay for classroom resources. 76% of primary and 68% of secondary school parents said they had to contribute anything towards classroom resources at an average of €74 for secondary school and €51 for primary schools.

Digital Tools

Over the past five years more and more secondary parents have been describing the increasing costs of digital tools, placing substantial financial pressure on them giving the high costs for these. This year we looked at specific items to see what schools were requesting parents to purchase.

91% of primary school parents said their children were not required to have a tablet, laptop or iPad. Five percent said their children required a tablet, 3% laptop and 2% iPad. Of the 9% who were required to pay for digital devices, the average cost was €147. For secondary schools 50% of parents said their child's school required them to pay for digital devices, the average cost was €430.

It's clear that some parents are concerned that savings made with the introduction of free schoolbooks is being eroded by digital costs while other parents simply expressed their concerns about the increasing costs of digital devices. However, for some parents they appreciated that their children needed digital devices in their day to day lives but felt those requested by the school were unnecessarily expensive.

"Principal told the child's class that the money saved by free books they can now spend on a laptop. Absolutely tone deaf" (Secondary School Parent)

"My son is going into 5th year, this was the first time we were entitled to Free schoolbooks, but then we were called to a meeting in the school where they advised that we would have to buy a



chrome book for our child which cost €500...so there is no benefit for us for the Free schoolbooks...if anything the cost has gone up" (Secondary School Parent)

The Solution

There is a risk that some parents are facing difficult financial decisions and considerable sacrifices to afford these digital devices. No parent should face financial hardship as a result of these costs. The Department of Education must further investigate the use of these devices across schools; how many mandate expensive items, and explore piloting a digital tools fund for low income parents.

Voluntary Contributions

More than three quarters (78%) of primary and 84% of secondary school parents said that their schools requested a voluntary contribution. The average amount asked for by schools was €87 for primary school parents and €133 for secondary school parents. 73% of primary and 78% of secondary school parents said the payment did not feel voluntary. Just under three in four (73%) secondary school parents (77%) and two thirds of primary school parents (66%) said that parents should not have to pay it.

The increase to the capitation rate for schools increase in Budget 2025 was very welcome, it's hoped this will be continued to place less pressure on schools to require voluntary contributions. However, parents were still unsure why it felt like they still had to pay for day to day running costs of schools.

"Why is the government not funding schools properly so cost is not put on to parents?" (Primary School Parent)

*"Voluntary contributions will still be asked for both children. Personally, I feel the pressure to pay for it no matter what despite not agreeing to it."
(Secondary School Parent)*

*"I'm concerned about not paying the school when they want the money for 'voluntary' fees"
(Primary School Parent)*

"I have 2 children but have only paid one 'voluntary' contribution so far and have not met the deadline. It's €155 per child and I have 2 kids in school (soon to be 3)" (Primary School Parent)

"We have four school age children, cost is a lot. And pressure to pay voluntary contributions on top of it all is a lot" (Secondary School Parent)



This year, a significant number of parents raised the fact that on top of voluntary contributions, schools run fundraisers throughout the year that they feel they have to help with. They appreciate that their school finances need it but don't see why it should come through parents as it places increased pressures on them.

"Overall schools don't get enough budgets which impacts the parents and children in the long term. Huge pressure for my child's school for fundraising through the parents associations which again puts added costs throughout the year" (Primary School Parent)

"Every month it feels like there is a fee due for something and I feel the school has to fund raise through the parent council to meet basic needs that the government should be covering the cost of" (Primary School Parent)

"Additionally, the school fundraising activities throughout the year require contributions, which add a few hundred euros more out of my pocket. Combined with other costs like uniforms, and supplies, these ongoing expenses create a significant financial burden for my family" (Primary School Parent)

The Solution

In Budget 2025 there was a welcome increase to the capitation rate. The Department of Education should look to continue increasing the rate over the course of this Government to restore it to pre-2010 levels, considering inflation levels, helping to appropriately fund schools, so that they do not require additional income from parents. Establish a voluntary contribution code of practice which sets out that all schools must publish where the funds go; guaranteed voluntary contributions fees for school essentials such as lockers, journals and access to book rental scheme; follow up or reminders for the payment of voluntary contributions can never be sent through a child; lists of parents who have and have not paid voluntary contributions must be kept anonymised.

School Tours and Trips

A significant number of parents this year raised the issue of having to pay for school tours and additional extra-curricular activities in school for their children, and highlighted that these costs could come up suddenly and be required to be paid almost immediately. 98% of primary and 96% of secondary school parents said they were asked to pay additional sums for school tours and trips. On average this was €144 for secondary and €64 for primary school.

"Each school trip can cost anything from a Dublin bus fare and packed lunch with treat to €28 (this is going by last year's trips which went up immensely), after school clubs in school (€20-€40 per club - each are only 1 day per week for 6 weeks)." (Primary School Parent)



"There's an optional trip and taking part will be beneficial. I don't want him to be left out if he doesn't go. So while it's my fault I'll be struggling I don't want him to be left out." (Secondary School Parent)

*"He is going to miss out on the fun tours due to crazy prices"
(Secondary School Parent)*

Half (50%) of secondary and 71% of primary school parents said they had to pay for extra-curricular activities within school. On average it was €84 for primary schools and €110 for secondary school parents. Parents spoke about how these costs can add up quickly.

"The additional cost through the year for activities they all tot up for 3 kids" (Primary School Parent)



Conclusion and Recommendations

Barnardos believes that no parent should face financial pressures and struggles in trying to meet what are essential costs for their children's education.

1. Back to School Footwear and Clothing Allowance

Amend the threshold for qualifying for the Allowance to allow more families who are struggling financially to benefit from it and reduce pressure on them.

2. End voluntary contributions

In Budget 2025 there was a welcome increase to the capitation rate. The Department of Education should look to continue increasing the rate over the course of this Government to restore it to pre-2010 levels, considering inflation levels, helping to appropriately fund schools so that they do not require additional income from parents. Establish a voluntary contribution code of practice which sets out: all schools must publish where the funds go; guaranteed voluntary contributions fees for school essentials such as lockers, journals and access to book rental scheme; follow up or reminders for the payment of voluntary contributions can never be sent through a child; lists of parents who have and have not paid voluntary contributions must be kept anonymised.

3. Digital Costs

There is a risk that some parents are facing difficult financial decisions and considerable sacrifices to afford these digital devices. No parent should face financial hardship as a result of these costs. The Department of Education must further investigate the use of these devices across schools, how many mandate expensive items, and explore piloting a digital tools fund for low income parents.

4. Affordable uniforms

The Department of Education's Circular on affordable uniforms is not being enforced. The Department should continue to promote affordable uniform practice for schools that would amalgamate and build on existing best practice and sustainable programmes, helping schools learn from each other.

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, Barnardos work with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support.

Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction. Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – **Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.**



Because childhood lasts a lifetime

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