

Introduction

Barnardos' School Costs Survey, now in its ninth year, uses information from parents to assess the real cost of getting their children ready to go back to school. Yet again the survey shows that it is a hugely stressful time for many parents as they fret and worry about how to pay for all that is required. Feelings of dismay and disillusionment are common too as parents feel the Government is not investing enough in the educational system and subsequently setting children up to fail due to ongoing cuts in supports to both parents and schools.

Parents are committed to doing the best for their children. They know the benefit of a decent education. They know it can break intergenerational cycles of poverty. However, equal access to our 'free education system' is being strongly attacked and some parents are buckling under the pressure, unable to foot the bill so their children can fully participate in the education system.

“Do not describe the education system as free; it is anything but. It is for the privileged few as everything else is in the country. Why should our children have their lives ruined by not being able to be educated correctly because they do not have enough money?”

“Education is under resourced and under pressure. It is a well-documented fact that a good education equates and creates opportunities and a better living. Please explain why our primary school pupils are treated like they are not our future?”

Survey design

Barnardos conducted an online survey with parents of school age children from the 2 to 20 July 2014. This survey was widely advertised through various social media channels and through supporters of Barnardos. In total, 2,027 parents completed the survey, the highest number of respondents in the survey's nine year history. Of these 1,438 were parents whose children attend primary school with the remaining 589 respondents with children in secondary school. While the sample is not statistically representative it does give an indication of the average costs incurred. These costs do not include school bags, sports equipment or transport costs.

Survey findings – profile of respondents

There is a wide geographical spread among the parents who completed the survey with every county across the country represented. However, approximately half of all respondents live in Dublin and the surrounding counties (Kildare, Meath and Wicklow).

While no specific question regarding household income was asked, the responses received clearly show the diverse income range of parents. A third of parents with children attending primary school and three in 10 parents with children in secondary school are engaged in full time employment. 14% of parents with primary school children and 15% of parents with secondary school children described themselves as unemployed.

Nearly 10% of respondents have children attending a DEIS school. The number of those attending fee paying schools was higher at secondary level with one in five compared with just 9% of parents sending their child to a fee paying primary school.

Survey findings – overall costs

Given the volume of comments received (945) from parents it is very evident that back to school costs continue to be a significant burden for all families not just those on low incomes or living on social welfare. It is a time of year dreaded by many parents as it so stressful. While some efforts have been made at national level and by some schools to address these costs on parents, there is a strong feeling that Government and schools are out of touch with the struggles faced by parents.

“The pressure is too much for middle class and lower class parents. We have been hit too hard and there are always new bills added i.e. water charges, on top of our outgoings and also taken from our wages. Where is this economic turnaround I hear so much about? I would not even qualify for the back to school grant if I applied. Where does it end?”

The image of a ‘free education’ system is seen as a joke as many parents are pushed to breaking point, often ending up in debt and using money lenders or loans from family to meet the costs. The cumulative cuts to date coupled with rising living costs and more taxes is heightening feelings of stress and hopelessness.

“I am a single parent with two children in secondary school, it will cost me nearly €2,000 to pay for everything that they need, I work part time! Free education? I think not!!”

“We need more help financially I have two kids in primary school. It will cost nearly €1,000 for them to go back to school. €100 per child for the Back to School Allowance is not enough, we are desperate and depressed.”

There is a sense the Government is unsupportive and not prioritising investment in education leaving schools running short and expecting parents to make up the shortfall. There is anger this continued underinvestment will not only affect children directly but also Ireland’s economy into the future. Although all children have a right to an education, some parents believe the sheer cost of sending their child to school puts this right under threat. This puts their child’s ability to reach their full potential in jeopardy as they do not have the money to enable the child stay in the school system.

“No parent wants their child to be an early school leaver or not to be able to further their education but financial constraints on already struggling families will leave them with no other option.”

Overall, the survey showed some savings for parents in certain categories especially for those with primary school children. There is evidence that schools are acknowledging the pressure on parents and changing their policies regarding uniforms, introducing school book rental schemes and reducing costs like stationery and other classroom sundries. This positive development needs to be more widespread as cumulatively the costs have remained largely the same and parents continue to be placed under real pressure.

Basic Costs for 2013 and 2014

Average costs	Senior Infants pupil		4 th Class pupil		1 st Year Pupil	
	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014
Clothing	€95	€110	€120	€120	€275	€200
Footwear	€45	€55	€60	€60	€60	€60
School Books	€80	€75	€120	€85	€275	€300
Classroom resources	€30	€30	€50	€40	€50	€50
Voluntary contribution	€100	€75	€50	€75	€125	€125
Total*	€350	€345	€400	€380	€785	€735
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€100		€100		€200	

*Not including extra costs such as school bag, trainers, extra-curricular activities etc

Survey findings – uniform costs

In primary schools, 76% of parents have to buy a uniform / tracksuit with the school crest on it, 12% can purchase a plain coloured uniform and the remaining do not need a school uniform. The use of school specific uniforms is even more popular at secondary school level with 97% of respondents having to buy a school specific uniform, 1% using a plain uniform and just over 2% having no school uniform. Needing a school specific uniform significantly adds to the cost as parents are forced to shop with particular retailers and are prevented from buying plain coloured jumpers, tracksuits and other items available in high street stores. For instance, the cost of a crested tracksuit ranges from €30 - €45 for a primary school pupil, a crested school jumper usually costs around €45 for a secondary school pupil and a school jacket can cost around €65. Plain coloured uniforms available in high street stores are much cheaper, with some low cost stores charging as little as €6.47 for a uniform set (jumper, polo shirts and trousers / skirt).

“I wish school would get rid of crested uniforms, I pay €45 for a jumper when others only need to spend €10 in Dunnes for them, my daughter’s jumper, tracksuit jumper and tracksuit bottoms are all crested.”

Barnardos welcomes a healthy competitive market in the supply of uniforms in the interests of providing choice and reducing the prices for parents. However, we do not condone any form of child or unethical labour in the production of any clothing including uniforms. All manufacturers of school uniforms must comply with international labour laws and the retailers stocking them must ensure these manufacturers are reputable and no child labour or other exploitative practices have been involved.

The survey findings show parents are continuing to pay approximately €100 for a primary school pupil’s uniform (19% are paying between €76-100, 17% are paying €101-125). The prices for secondary school uniforms continue to vary considerably, but on average the amount paid this year has reduced from last year. More than 42% of parents are spending between €125-€200 on the uniform but nearly one in five (18%) parents continue to pay in excess of €250. The first year of secondary school is the most expensive for parents as all items must be bought at that point. In some schools, the jumpers change after completing the Junior Cert for pupils going into the Senior Cycle. In addition, most parents indicated the amount spent on school shoes for a primary school and / or a secondary school pupil is between €40 and €60.

From the parents who submitted comments it was evident there is a strong preference to have uniforms, but they would prefer plain coloured uniforms with iron on / sewn on crests.

“I agree to having a uniform but school uniforms should be generic. Secondary schools should not be allowed to insist on specific type or supplier of uniforms which charge ridiculous costs. A simple iron on or stich on crest would be sufficient and a fraction of the price.”

When asked if uniform prices had changed since last year, nearly two in five (38%) parents with primary school pupils felt there was no change but the same proportion (38%) felt the prices had increased by up to €50. Similarly more than a third (36%) of parents with secondary school pupils stated there was no change but 38% felt the cost had risen by up to €50. This may be due to their child getting older and needing larger sizes, more of their children joining the school system, items were not renewed last year so more shopping to do this year or a change in the retailer. Others commented the overall uniform costs went down due to schools holding uniform sales / uniform swaps, parents receiving older uniforms from friends or uniform still fits so no need to buy a new one this year.

“School held a ‘uniform swap’ so I got all I needed for free and I donated any good condition uniforms that we didn't need anymore.”

For the first time, parents were asked if the school uniform has changed in the past three years. In the majority of cases (seven in 10 (71%) of parents with primary school children and six in 10 (61%) of parents with secondary school children) there has been no change. However for other parents there were changes to the uniform. The feedback shows some schools amended their uniform to make cheaper options available by switching supplier or reducing specific items in favour of generic items or introducing sewn on crests. However, other schools introduced new uniform items, revised their crests or introduced entire new uniform for senior cycle meaning all parents have to purchase new uniforms.

“Now no need for crested polo shirt so I can get just plain white.”

Survey findings – book costs

The survey found the cost of school books is exorbitant especially for those with children entering 1st and 5th year in secondary school, as they are beginning the Junior and Leaving Certificate cycles. Parents expressed continued anger at the inability to pass books on due to new editions being published and these editions being prescribed by the teacher or the teacher choosing different books altogether for that subject. Again, parents are frustrated and question the merit of workbooks, particularly in primary schools, as they are expensive and cannot be reused and feel ordinary copy books would suffice.

“Workbooks are a staple of primary school and are very expensive and not reusable. Can something be done to address this?”

At primary school level, the majority of parents continue to spend on average between €76 and €100 for books. However, in secondary school the amount spent has increased, with three in 10 parents paying in excess of €300. Like last year, the survey found huge variance between the costs of school books within classes. For instance in 4th class, some parents are paying around €85 for books while others are paying over €140 for books to cover the same curriculum. This difference may be due to school book rental schemes being in operation or some teachers consciously choosing cheaper and fewer books to put on the booklist. Having such disparity adds to parents' frustrations and undermines the sense that everyone has the same access and chances to benefit from education. This disparity was also evident when asked if parents felt their overall outlay on books had changed since last year.

More than a quarter (27%) of parents of primary school children and 24% of parents with secondary school children felt there was no change. However, nearly half (46%) of parents of primary school children and three in ten parents with secondary school pupils believe the amount spent was up to and over €50 more than 2013. This can be explained by the fact costs rise as children move up through the system, but also book prices increased by 1.4% (the first rise since 2009) according to the Irish Educational Publishers Association survey¹.

“There should be more common use of the same books for the same years. My son and daughter are in two separate secondary schools and don't have even one book in common so we couldn't re-use them. Schools should provide book rental schemes so people can pass on books.”

The Voluntary Code of Practice among publishers which prohibits the printing of new editions for a minimum of six years is being adhered to but does not appear to have had widespread impact for some parents despite being in operation since 2011.

“I believe that the system whereby publishers bring out new updated editions of books with minimal changes, and schools require the pupils to have these new versions is absolutely disgraceful and an obvious money-making ploy. I believe the using of workbooks which cannot then be recycled instead of copies is also very unfair to struggling parents.”

Barnardos is delighted the survey revealed a significant increase in the availability of book rental schemes in primary schools following the Government's investment in this area. In 2014, more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents have access to a school book rental scheme in primary school, up from 55% in 2013 and 50% in 2012. Unfortunately such availability is still limited in secondary schools with only two in five parents having access to such a scheme.

“Every school should have a rental scheme as it cuts the cost in half and takes some of the pressure away.”

The survey shows huge variation across schools (both primary and secondary levels) in terms of what is covered by the school book rental scheme. The majority of parents (57% with primary school children and two-thirds with secondary school pupils) stated only the textbooks were included. In primary schools, given the over reliance on workbooks, the textbooks usually only amount to the English Readers and do not cover wide subject areas. This results in parents still having to pay for all the workbooks and stationery requirements separately. Some respondents (15% with primary schools children and 18% with secondary schools children) said their scheme includes textbooks and workbooks.

Only a minority of schemes include all textbooks, workbooks and the stationery according to the parents (one in 10 with primary schools children and just 1% with secondary schools children). This significant disparity in what is included translates into huge differences in amounts sought to participate in the scheme. It is also evident from the comments some schemes are only open to some classes / years therefore preventing all parents in that school benefiting from the savings and convenience that such schemes can offer. There is a strong preference for a standardised system to be in place.

“While the school book rental scheme as an idea is great, our one covers only about half the textbooks - we still have to buy about €150 worth of books. Where is the saving in that?”

¹ Irish Educational Publishers Survey preliminary findings, July 2014

The annual contribution continues to be less than €50 for the majority of parents to participate in a primary school scheme and remained largely unchanged for 2014, however the amount sought did increase for one in five parents. (For many it is the first year of the scheme being in operation so they were unable to answer the question.) In secondary schools, the fee to join the school book rental scheme for most parents ranged from €76 to €100 and again this fee did not change for most (however it did increase for nearly one in five (17%) parents).

“I think the minister should look at how much schools are charging parents for the book rental schemes. This payment should be the same in all schools instead of some schools charging ridiculous prices.”

When asked who manages the schemes, the majority of parents (across both primary and secondary levels) were unsure who runs it. However 28% said teachers ran it in primary schools and three in 10 said teachers organised it in secondary schools. According to the parents, the Parent’s Association led it in 16% of primary schools and one in 10 secondary schools, while the Board of Management ran it in 11% of primary and 12% of secondary schools

For many parents, especially those just joining the school, they were unsure how long the school book rental scheme had been in operation. For those who answered, a quarter stated their scheme at primary level had only commenced in the last two years. This directly corresponds to the increased promotion of and availability of funding by the Government to establish these schemes in all primary schools. However, just one in 20 parents stated their secondary school had set up a book rental scheme in the last two years. Barriers such as changes to the Junior Cycle, use of digital devices and breadth of subject choice are identified as obstacles preventing the establishment of school book rental schemes in secondary schools.

Survey findings – digital books

The use of digital devices by teachers and pupils is becoming increasingly common. Barnardos agrees it is important children have access to and are equipped with skills to use and navigate their way through the array of resources that can greatly enhance their education. However, the use of tablet devices is being instructed by schools in the absence of a national digital strategy which is still being drafted by the Department of Education. As a result, parents’ experiences vary greatly with differing costs associated. Barnardos’ survey found that 14% of respondents had a child using a tablet in secondary schools. In most of these cases, the school sourced the tablets and they were paid for by the parents along with the e-books or apps required. In primary schools, 13% of parents said their child used a tablet in school and in the majority of cases this was supplied by the school largely through fundraising done by the Parent’s Association. Likewise the purchase of accompanying e-books, apps or software to use on the tablets was done through fundraising.

“I think it’s absolutely crazy that all first years in our school have to buy an iPad, costing up to €850 including e-books.”

Parents recognise the need for their children to have access to and use of digital devices. However, the cost of the hardware plus the licence and higher VAT imposed on e-textbooks adds significantly to the financial burden on them. Other concerns expressed related to the poor broadband infrastructure and whether teachers have been trained to teach using these devices.

“Cutting the Back to School Allowance and having no system for making electronic devices available to low income parents has resulted in bullying and pupils dropping out of school early as parents cannot afford ‘the FREE education’ provided in Ireland”

Survey findings – voluntary contribution and registration fees

The survey found that nearly two-thirds (65%) of parents of primary school pupils (a slight reduction on last year's 68%) and three-quarters (76%) of parents of secondary school pupils have been asked for a voluntary contribution. Again there are significant variations in the amount sought and this could be indicative of some schools asking parents to pay what they can afford rather than prescribing a specific amount. It seems to vary most significantly within primary schools; €50 for most parents while others (about one in five or 19%) are asked for a donation of €100-€150. The majority of parents stated this amount has not changed since last year. In secondary schools, the majority of parents are being asked to donate €100-€150 but others are being asked for in excess of €200 and this too hasn't changed since last year for most parents.

“The cost of sending a child to school is beyond many parents these days and some schools can be relentless in their pursuit of 'voluntary contributions' because the school does not get adequate government funding. I feel these payments should be unilaterally banned.”

“It is scandalous that some schools ask for such huge 'voluntary' contributions (€250 for two children payable by 30 September) while others charge little or nothing. This needs to be investigated.”

Tactics to pursue parents for non-payment of the voluntary contribution are common in both primary and secondary schools. These include sending reminder letters / emails / texts directly to the parents (more than a third (34%) of parents with primary school children and nearly half (45%) secondary school children) or sending such reminders via their children (more than one in five (22%) parents with primary school children and 17% of secondary school children). Other methods included reminders in newsletters or children denied school journal or lockers if the payment is not paid.

“Children are not allowed lockers until the contribution is paid. There is no choice but to pay it.”

The practice of charging registration fees to secure a child's place in the school is widespread, especially at secondary school level. More than half of parents with secondary school children stated they had been asked for a registration fee, usually between €50 and €100. Often this was non-refundable or used towards the voluntary contribution if the child was accepted into the school. At primary level, nearly one in five (18%) parents were asked for a registration fee, usually between €25-50 and this too was often non-refundable or used to offset the parent's voluntary contribution.

“Secondary schools with a high demand charge €50 to send in applications! I applied to four secondary schools, two were fee paying, two were not, my son did not get into the non fee paying schools yet the schools did not refund the €50. I think this is scandalous that schools can do this.”

Survey findings – additional costs

On top of all the expenses already incurred, parents (more than four in five (82%) primary school children and almost two-thirds (65%) of secondary school children) are still being asked to pay towards classroom resources such as stationery and photocopying costs. Again it is interesting but unclear how some schools manage to provide these resources without charging parents and others cannot. The amount sought on average in primary schools is approximately €25-€50. In secondary schools, the charge has remained at an average of €50. Again the imposition of charges for participating in extra curricular activities such as swimming, speech and drama classes etc, varies across schools with primary schools seeking on average €26-50 per pupil per term but secondary schools seeking over €100 per pupil per term.

“All books and stationery should be provided by schools free of charge. Parents should not have to pay for music, sports and dance etc. These are part of any decent curriculum and should be provided for by the Department of Education.”

Survey findings – Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

Nearly half (46%) of parents of primary school children and more than half (55%) of parents of secondary school children had applied for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. While receiving the payment is welcomed, the reduced rates of €100 for a primary school pupil and €200 for a secondary pupil are not keeping pace with the amounts being spent by parents and as a result they have a huge deficit to fill from their own limited budgets. This shortfall is too much for some, subsequently sending them into debt. Again, parents were extremely critical of the tight eligibility criteria for the payment and its failure to take expenses like rent / mortgage costs into account. It means many parents in need of assistance are excluded despite being just over the income threshold.

“Free education is what we are meant to have in Ireland. It's a disgrace. I have twins starting in 1st year in September and it's costing over €1,200. We are not entitled to the back to school allowance as my husband earns €20 over the required amount.”

Survey findings – School transport costs

The issue of school transport costs was raised by many parents as the charges are significant and it disproportionately affects rural pupils. The current fees applicable for the school transport scheme are €100 for a primary school pupil (with a maximum of €220 per family) and €350 per secondary school student (with a maximum of €650 per family). These fees have to be paid by end of September which on top of all the other expenses really adds to the pressure and is crippling for some families.

“I also have to pay €650 in school transport costs for my two children. I am working and get no assistance towards any of these costs. In total it costs me over €1,100 every September to send them back to school. Working parents are being crucified with these costs. Something needs to be done to help us.”

“I now have to pay for my daughter's bus ticket as she is not attending her nearest school even though she has a medical card. I decided to send her to that school as I believe the school can cater better for children with learning disabilities but now I have to get a loan in order to pay for her ticket. The right to choose which school to send your child to has been taken away from parents if they can't afford to pay for bus tickets.”

Government and school responses

During the past few years, the need to tackle school costs has remained on the political agenda with ongoing pressure on the Minister for Education from Barnardos and other NGOs, parents and the media. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection examined this issue in depth and issued a range of recommendations in its report, *Tackling Back to Schools Costs* (2013). Currently, the Department of Education is finalising a parent and pupil charter to enhance engagement between schools and families and is aiming to have this operational in September 2015. It will compel schools to consult on a range of issues including healthy eating, book rental schemes and use of technology.

The outcome of these efforts has resulted in some schools being more responsive to reducing the costs for parents. But more needs to be done at national and school level to ease the very real financial pressure on parents getting their children ready to fully participate in Ireland's 'free' education system. At a minimum greater statutory investment is required to ensure schools can function properly and are

not reliant on parents to make up the shortfall, principally through imposing voluntary contributions. Although Ireland's young population as a proportion of total population is large its expenditure on education at 9.7% of GDP is significantly below the EU average (13% of GDP). More investment continues to be spent at third level rather than primary level despite three times more children attending primary school than attend third level. This needs to be rebalanced to ensure greater equality of access and participation for all children.

Response to addressing uniform costs

The school uniform policy is set by the school's Board of Management. The Department of Education issued a circular to all schools urging their Boards of Management to consult with their parent body in February / March 2014 to ascertain their views on the school uniform. The Department devised a template questionnaire and encouraged schools to amend it according to their own specifications. The intention was for the results to be reviewed and any changes to the uniform policy to become effective for the 2014/2015 academic year. Barnardos distributed its own survey in April 2014 to assess the distribution and engagement of the Department's questionnaire. Barnardos found less than half (43%) of respondents received a questionnaire from their school, while 52% did not and one in 20 were unsure if they had. Other organisations monitoring this engagement with parents (either through a survey or anecdotally) did highlight a greater uptake. Given this level of variation it is unclear how many schools did distribute the survey and what changes were made to uniform policies at a school level on foot of this.

Interestingly, from the responses from parents to the School Costs Survey it does show disparity on whether they were asked their views on uniform policy and if it led to any change.

"I believe schools should be instructed to have non-crest uniform and tracksuit as this adds hugely to the costs and the recent school uniform survey did not give the option to request this. It was of no use as it was worded in such a way as to force certain answers in my opinion."

"All schools should have a generic uniform - school specify the colour and parents can buy it in any department store. A survey was meant to be sent to all parents this year, but our school didn't. I asked at a Parents Association meeting and no one knew about it. The secretary then asked the Principal who said 'no one requested it'."

"Following from the Department of Education survey that parents completed, the tracksuit no longer has to be crested."

To assist with the costs of uniforms the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) is a means tested payment available for those on low income as long as they satisfy the tight eligibility criteria. The rates have been significantly cut during the recession and the amounts payable are now €100 for four to 11 year olds and €200 for children aged 12 to 22 years (only if they are attending secondary school). The reduced rates add further pressure on parents as they have a greater deficit to make up from their own reduced resources.

This year €46.38m has been allocated to the BSCFA. This is just over half of the €90m spent by the Department of Social Protection in 2011. Already it has been paid automatically to 127,478 eligible families in respect of 230,662 children as their circumstances have remained unchanged. Any new applicants will have to complete an application form. The Department of Social Protection is receiving more than 5,500 new applications weekly².

² Irish Independent, 21 July 2014

To qualify for the BSCFA, the total household income must be below that set out in the table below. The income thresholds continue to remain different for two-parent and one-parent families leaving already vulnerable one-parent families at increased risk of poverty. Also these thresholds continue to be less than those applicable to the Family Income Supplement (FIS). Having different thresholds often results in many low income families being ineligible to apply for the BSCFA and plunging them further into debt as they struggle to meet all the costs of sending children to school.

Income thresholds for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

Family Type	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children
Couple	€563.60	€593.40	€623.20	€653.00*
Lone parent	€410.10	€439.90	€469.70	€499.50*
FIS income guidelines same for 2 parent and lone parent families	€506.00	€602.00	€703.00	€824.00

* €29.80 each extra child

Response to school book costs

In response to the continued outcry of high school book costs, the Department continues to encourage schools to set up school book rental schemes. To advance this an additional €15m was allocated in Budget 2014, to be spread over three years, to entice primary schools that didn't already have one to set up a school book rental scheme. Overall it translates into €150 per pupil in a DEIS school and €100 per pupil in a non-DEIS school. Awarding schools with additional funding that had not set up book rental schemes over those that had was met with much public disquiet. However, fewer schools than planned were eligible for this funding and now the remaining funding is being distributed across all primary schools in 2015 and 2016. It means these other schools will receive €20 per child in a DEIS school and €18 per child in a non-DEIS school in both those years. All this extra funding is on top of the School Book Grant scheme.

The budget for the School Book Grant Scheme for the 2014/2015 academic year remains unchanged at €15m. This is distributed to all schools to assist with the cost of school books. Each school has already received their annual lump sum calculated on a capitation basis of €11 per pupil in non-DEIS primary schools and €21 in DEIS primary schools and €24 per pupil in non-DEIS secondary schools and €39 in DEIS secondary schools. The distribution of these funds is solely at the discretion of the principal. However, as mentioned the Department strongly urges each school to use this fund to set up a school book rental scheme and published its *Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools* in February 2013 to assist with this. Nevertheless, the principal can also disseminate this funding to pupils he/ she deems 'needy' in the form of book vouchers or cash.

Since 2011 a voluntary Code of Practice for the Irish Educational Publishers Association has been in operation committing publishers not to revise textbooks for a minimum of six years and to co-operate with individual schools in the development of textbook rental schemes. The code appears to be complied with as Irish Educational Publishers Association survey found only 34 titles out of 2,758 had been revised and reprinted in 2014³. However, parents' experiences paint a different picture. The survey clearly shows parents are still aggrieved by the frequent publication of new editions and the changing of books by teachers preventing them from reusing books and subsequently not benefitting from the operation of this code. This could be due to the fact there are usually several years between children in which time editions may change or that teachers are choosing alternative textbooks whose

³ Irish Educational Publishers Association preliminary findings, July 2014

edition has changed in previous years, meaning parents can't use older children's copy. The then Minister for Education also intimated that the code of practice may become mandatory if not fully implemented⁴. Barnardos would agree with the Code being placed on a statutory basis to ensure savings for parents.

Response to demand for secondary school places

In response to the widespread practice of establishing waiting lists for entry into secondary schools and charging parents a registration fee for adding their child's name to the list, the draft General Scheme of an Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2013 was published. This Bill, if enacted, would outlaw such practices. However, the formal Heads of this Bill to instigate its passage through the Oireachtas has yet to be finalised so there is no immediate action to address schools charging registration fees.

Barnardos recommendations

Investment in Education

It is imperative Budget 2015 provides for greater investment into the education system, especially at primary level. Ireland already spends less than the EU average on education and subsequently access to and participation in Ireland's 'free education system' is influenced by parent's ability to pay, with those on lower incomes disproportionately affected. Education is an equaliser and all children should receive the same quality of education enabling them to reach their potential regardless of their parents' income.

Recommendation:

- Increase per capita investment in primary and secondary level schools to remove the expectation that parents will make up the shortfall in the running of schools.

Uniform costs

The survey responses clearly show some schools have amended their uniforms in the interests of saving money, but others have not. Barnardos recognises the value of a uniform as a way to ensure equality among all pupils and create a sense of school identity, and there is a strong appetite among parents to continue with uniforms, but at a lower cost. A child's education should not suffer because of a uniform issue. A school's identity and ethos would not be jeopardised by the Patron Body and / or Board of Management deciding to reduce the amount of clothing requiring the school crest or choosing a plain coloured uniform that could have a crest sewn or ironed onto if desired. Some schools have embraced some of these practical changes but it should be done in all schools.

Recommendation:

- Ensure all schools review their uniform policy from a value for money perspective.

School books

'Five year vision towards school books for all'

Barnardos has consistently advocated for the operation of school book rental schemes in all schools and it is heartening the survey revealed more primary schools have set up such schemes. However there is a wide variation in how schemes are operating across schools. A standardised school book rental system spanning all primary and secondary schools is urgently needed. Such a system would enable Ireland to move towards comparable models that operate in Northern Ireland and Scotland where all textbooks are provided to pupils for free or at minimal rental costs.

⁴ Dáil Debate, 28th May 2013

Barnardos believes this is achievable if all schools receiving funding under the School Book Grant and all primary schools obtaining funding from the School Book Rental Scheme, use this money to commence book rental schemes and then commit to continually reinvesting the funds annually. This would ensure a suite of books are available to all pupils and the fee charged to parents would be reduced year on year. A cap on scheme fees would need to be imposed to ensure that parents would benefit from savings from the outset.

This transition over a five year period to an entire free school book system was also recommended by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection report on school costs⁵. To achieve this vision, the following key ingredients are essential:

- A) Political will and school leadership from Patron Bodies, principals, Boards of Management and teachers to roll out school book rental schemes.
- B) Commitment from the school to reinvest its school book grant (and School Book Rental Scheme funding for primary schools) back into the scheme on an annual basis.
- C) Schools must to be supported to set up and run school book rental schemes especially to deal with the administration, storage and distribution of the books.
- D) Teachers must stick with their preferred textbook for a number of years to ensure it can be re-used.
- E) Publishers would have to ensure that no new editions were printed.
- F) Use of workbooks would have to be reduced as they cannot be recycled and instead copy or exercise books should be used as they are far cheaper.
- G) This system can be supported through the more frequent use of additional free resources such as online learning materials for use on classroom whiteboards, photocopying worksheets and availing of public libraries where some class novels can be borrowed.

Recommendations:

- Implement a five year vision towards achieving free school books for all, through ensuring schools use their School Book Grant and School Book Rental Scheme funds to invest in school book rental schemes so to incrementally build up a set of textbooks for all their pupils.
- Place the Code of Practice for publishers on a statutory basis to ensure no new editions are published in the next six years.
- Adequately resource implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Digital media

The use of digital devices continues to be very ad-hoc and is being spearheaded independently by various schools as there has been no national direction on this issue. Barnardos recognises the value of using different mediums to teach and to introduce children to the technological world. However this current ad-hoc approach is leading to even greater inequality between pupils and their exposure to technology as its implementation largely rests on their parent's ability to afford the device and accompanying software etc. The Department of Education must expedite the development of its national digital strategy. It must explore and include low cost, robust devices designed specifically for the school market as opposed to the current tablet options. Such strategies are already undertaken in similar projects involving laptops in developing countries. The model should be not-for-profit and in the best interest of developing equality of opportunity across Ireland's education system. Also the issue of 23% VAT applicable to e-books must be removed as it is at odds with the current VAT exemption on printed school books and makes the move to digital school books more expensive for families.

⁵ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection report, *Tackling Back to Schools Costs*, 2013

Recommendations:

- Expedite the finalisation of and implementation of the Department of Education's digital strategy applicable in all schools covering how and when various forms of technology are used in the classroom including low cost devices used, content, broadband compatibility etc.
- Remove the 23% VAT applicable to e-textbooks.

Additional costs

There was much anger among parents that schools and the Department would expect parents to pay a voluntary contribution towards a supposedly 'free education system' when the reality is the cumulative costs of getting children ready for school is pushing families to breaking point. Also the continued variation in schools charging for classroom resources and extra-curricular activities must be addressed as it undermines the equality principle that all children receive the same level of education. Schools should be adequately financed from the exchequer so parents are not expected to pay for all these additional costs.

Recommendations:

- Implement the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection on tackling school costs, specifically around eliminating voluntary contributions.
- Do not increase the school transport charges in Budget 2015 as this adversely affects children from rural backgrounds.

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

The significant reductions to the BSCFA on top of other welfare cutbacks have been too much for some families to bear. While the payment never covers the full costs its value has diminished further, putting more low income families into debt. Also as it is a targeted payment more low income families should be eligible.

Recommendations:

- Raise the rate applicable for Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.
- Synchronise the income thresholds up to those applicable to Family Income Supplement so all family types and all those in receipt of Family Income Supplement are eligible for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.

Conclusion

More than 2,000 parents have spoken to us and made clear that a 'free' education is in fact crippling expensive in Ireland. Not only do parents have to face massive costs to get their children to school, there is huge variance in the figures. The experiences reveal some schools insist upon full, crested uniforms, do not have a book rental scheme (or only a limited scheme) and high voluntary contributions; while others might have plain uniforms, school book rental schemes and low or no voluntary contribution requirement. This means families are at the mercy of local circumstance, which is simply not fair. Especially as inevitably it is the families already struggling who are hit hardest.

We have a Constitutional commitment to delivering free primary education. With economic recovery on everyone's lips, now is the right time for the Government to take a stand and reverse years of underinvestment in education. It must show leadership and take decisive action to lower school costs for all parents.

We believe our recommendations, if implemented, will make huge strides in ending school costs inequality. We must ensure all children have access to a free, high quality education system, unencumbered by financial constraints.