

## Back to School Costs Analysis

26<sup>th</sup> July 2010

### Introduction

The return to school can bring a sense of excitement and dread for both pupils and parents. The costs associated with getting children ready to begin or return to school can place a huge financial burden on the household budget. The combined costs of school uniforms, books, sports gear, equipment and stationery can be exorbitant especially for families reliant on social welfare or in low paid employment. Although the latest Consumer Price Index showed that prices were lower by 1.1% compared to May 2009, the cost of education saw a yearly increase of 9.1%<sup>1</sup>. Barnardos remains concerned that the ongoing costs facing families sending children to school will place family finances under increased strain and children under increased pressure, consequently affecting their educational experience and outcomes.

### Basic Costs

Barnardos conducted a survey with a sample of parents of school going children and while the sample is not statistically representative it does give an indication of the average basic costs incurred. They do not include school bags, sports clothing or equipment, stationery, or extra curricular associated costs.

The findings from the survey show that nearly 40% of parents had access to a school book rental schemes which can significantly reduce the costs of buying books. However they frequently cover only the core subjects which mean parents still have to cover the expense of textbooks for the other subjects. The use of workbooks also restricts the ability to recycle through a rental scheme or within families. The costs of books are most expensive in 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year when the pupils are entering the Junior and Leaving Certificate cycles. The majority of survey respondents (58%) did experience an increase in the amount spent on books this year in comparison to 2009, which accurately reflects the Consumer Price Index increase.

The survey respondents were from across the socio-economic spectrum and it revealed that 90% of pupils in the survey are attending schools that require specific uniforms with the school crest on them. This adds to the cost as parents are precluded from buying jumpers, tracksuits and some other items in high street stores. School specific tracksuits start from around €35, jumpers can cost €40-60 while coats and blazers cost over €100.

The other costs associated with going to school all add to the financial pressure on parents. The prices for school bags and trainers varies significantly from €20 to €120 with increasing pressure on parents to buy top brand items as opposed to cheaper options. Any extra curricular activities such as swimming lessons, art and crafts and speech and drama classes incur charges of around €30 each. School stationery and photocopy charges are approximately €40-€50. The majority of parents were asked

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<sup>1</sup> CSO (2009) Consumer Price Index, June 2010

for a voluntary contribution towards the cost of running the school; this varies significantly from €50 to €500 with €100 being the most common amount sought. However, there is an expectation that this would be given and one parent reported a

school policy of sending letters to parents if the contribution has not been paid.

<b>Child aged 6 going into senior infants in primary school</b>	<b>Basic Costs</b>
Clothing	€85
Footwear	€50
School Books	€75
Photocopying fees	€50
Voluntary contribution	€75
<b>Total*</b>	<b>€335</b>
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€200

\* Not including extra costs such as school bag, trainers, art & craft supplies etc estimated to be between €25 - €85

<b>Child aged 10 going into 4<sup>th</sup> class in primary school</b>	<b>Basic Costs</b>
Clothing	€110
Footwear	€70
School Books	€130
Stationery	€50
Voluntary contribution*	€100
<b>Total*</b>	<b>€460</b>
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€200

\* Not including extra costs such as school bag, trainers, art & craft supplies etc estimated to be between €25 - €85

<b>Secondary School – child aged 12 entering 1<sup>st</sup> year</b>	<b>Basic Costs</b>
Clothing	€290
Footwear	€80
School Books	€265
Stationery	€60
Voluntary contribution*	€120
<b>Total</b>	<b>€815</b>
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€305

\*\* Not including extra costs such as school bag, trainers, art & craft supplies etc estimated to be between €25 - €85

### **Quotes from parents**

*"Free education, I don't think so, I work part time so don't get back to school allowance, finding it very hard, I have two in secondary and one in primary, just cant manage."*

*"These costs do not include the new shoes, runners, bag, lunch case, coat, sport equipment, hurl & helmet. I think school costs are shameful. Why can't children borrow books or buy second hand books, instead of having to buy the latest edition of the books every year. The majority of my child's books are workbooks which can't be recycled and are very wasteful."*

*"I think it should be compulsory for all schools to run a book rental scheme this would save the parents money and would be more environmentally friendly recycling the books and stop the publishers from reprinting different editions with only minor changes."*

*"My son is starting a new school in 4th class. This school has a regulation uniform with a crest on the sweaters, fleece and raincoat. If the crests were available separately it would make the uniforms much cheaper to purchase."*

*"Cost of uniform would be much less if everything wasn't crested (jumpers, polo shirts, tracksuits) it bothers me that they cost so much and yet are low quality (so not able to be kept and past on to siblings). It's bothering me slightly that my son will be 'different' as he's got plain polo shirt instead of the crested on but there is over a thirty euro difference."*

### **Current Government Supports**

At policy level, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) strategy which incorporates a series of interventions to address educational disadvantage in 667 primary schools and 203 secondary schools has been operating since 2005 and is now in its final year. It is currently being evaluated and results are expected in early 2011. However, schools not designated as disadvantaged have had to bear the brunt of a wide range of cutbacks which will have an adverse affect on the educational performance and outcomes of its pupils. This will disproportionately affect those 56% of pupils from unemployed backgrounds who attend non-DEIS schools.

There are few direct financial supports available to low income families to assist with the costs associated with returning a child to school. In fact, more families are experiencing hardship due to increases introduced last year such as the school transport fees which has increased substantially for secondary school students to €300 per child (with a maximum of €650 per family).

### **The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA)**

The number of children benefiting from the BSCFA has been growing consistently since the onset of the recession highlighting the growing need for support for families struggling with the costs of returning children to school. In 2007, 180,252 children received the BSCFA, this rose to 200,246 in 2008, and to 277,713 in 2009. Despite this increased demand the rates payable have remained unchanged since 2007 at €200 for children aged 2 – 11years and €305 for children aged 12 – 22years.

This means tested payment is intended for those groups identified as being at risk of poverty such as those reliant on social welfare or in low paid employment including those on certain employment schemes. To qualify for the BSCFA, the total household income must be below the amounts set out in the table below. Bizarrely, the income thresholds remain different for two-parent and one-parent families leaving already vulnerable one-parent families at increased risk of poverty. The BSCFA income guidelines are still less than those applicable to the Family Income Supplement (FIS).

<b>Family Type</b>	<b>1 child</b>	<b>2 children</b>	<b>3 children</b>	<b>4 children</b>
Couple * €29.80 each extra child	€563.60	€593.40	€623.20	€653.00*
Lone parent * €29.60 for each extra child	€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

### **School Book Grant Scheme**

The Department of Education and Skills is changing how it assists schools in helping families with the costs of school books. Up to now, school principals applied for funding in the interests of assisting 'needy' children in both primary and secondary school as identified by them. The distribution of this funding was at the discretion of the principal and / or Board of Management and took different forms such as the creation of a school book rental scheme, book vouchers for the child's family or books being provided on loan.

Now in the interests of streamlining the payment of grants and reducing the administrative burden on schools and on the Department itself, payments will be given on a capitation basis. Although the distribution of the funds will still be at the discretion of the principal, it is strongly encouraged that a school book rental scheme be established. This development will also support recycling of books and a reduction in the use of new editions of books with such frequency.

In June 2010, the Department distributed €14.6m to schools for this Book Grant Scheme. For the primary schools, this equates to €11 per pupil in non-DEIS schools and €21 in DEIS schools. While secondary schools receive €24 per pupil in non-DEIS schools and €39 in DEIS schools.

Barnardos welcomes this development as it is a step in the right direction towards easing the costs on parents and ensuring children will have the correct books from the outset. However, as the payment is given to all children and no sanctions are imposed for not setting up a school book rental scheme it remains to be seen if children from disadvantaged backgrounds will benefit significantly.

### **Recommendations:**

Despite the perception that all children have 'free' education, for many parents dependent on social welfare or in low paid employment school costs are prohibitive. The stress associated with these costs can have a negative impact on the educational experience of their child.

Barnardos urges the Government to consider the following recommendations:

- Prevent any further cuts to education spending and services.
- Synchronise the income thresholds up to those applicable to FIS so all family types and all those in receipt of FIS are eligible for the BSCFA.
- Enforce the establishment of school book rental schemes in all schools now that a capitation grant is being rolled out to all schools to assist with book costs.
- Reduce the use of workbooks to facilitate the exchange of textbooks between pupils and siblings.
- Do not increase the school transport charges anymore as this adversely affects children from rural backgrounds.

