

School Costs Survey 2016

Briefing Paper

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Introduction

Education is not free in Ireland. That is the overwhelming message from parents who took the 2016 Barnardos' School Costs Survey. For more than a decade thousands of parents have been using the Barnardos' School Costs Survey to speak out about the high cost of sending their children to school and this year is no different. Ireland's education system is lauded by Government as free to access; but the responses to this year's survey tell us otherwise. Under-investment in schools during prosperity and cuts during the recession have left parents shouldering the cost of an underfunded system. It is a burden many parents can ill afford. Parents told us they are scrimping on household bills, forgoing necessities and even going into debt to pay for their child to go to school in Ireland's supposedly free education system. No child or family should have to suffer in order to access education.

"I am a single parent of four children, three school-going. September is an awful month for my family, the pressure is immense. I work part-time and do what I can with wages, plus I pay €1,000 private rent monthly. We can't survive from week to week as it is and school costs hold me over the edge so much so that my teenagers ask if I want them to leave school. My children deserve the same opportunity as the next child."

As we approach the first Budget of a new Government the time is ripe for change. The Partnership Government has committed to increase education spending by €500 million by 2021. This is a welcome commitment, yet divided out through the whole education system and across five years it remains to be seen what kind of impact it will have on the costs parents face. It is the Government's responsibility to adequately fund education - not parents'. All children deserve an equal chance at a bright future and education is crucial in realising this. Education provides the frame upon which a child's life and opportunities will be built. Making access to education dependant on a parent's ability to pay is fundamentally inconsistent with the ideals this country was founded upon; equal rights, equal opportunities and the commitment to all children of the nation being cherished equally.

"Our constitution states that all children have a right to free primary education, and this is simply not the case when parents are having to pay for text-books and core lessons. It is NOT a free education system, and this is something the Minister for Education and Skills should address."

Survey design

Barnardos carried out an online survey of parents with school-aged children from 4th to 25th July 2016. This survey was widely advertised via various social media channels and via supporters of Barnardos. In total 1,475 parents completed the survey; 1,008 with children in primary school, while the remaining 467 respondents' children attend secondary school. While the sample is not statistically representative it does create an indicative, vivid picture of the burden of school costs on families. The items included in the survey cover school books, school uniforms and footwear, digital technology, and all fees paid to the school. The survey **does not** include costs relating to school bags or sports equipment.

Survey findings – profile of respondents

Parents from every county in Ireland took the survey. Almost a third of responses came from Dublin, with the other counties in Leinster making up 29% of the overall responses. Munster was also strongly represented with 23% of the responses. There were fewer responses from Connaught (10%) and Ulster (5%) which is unsurprising given both have smaller populations.

The majority of parents (37%) who answered the survey are employed or self-employed full-time, representing a slight increase from last year. A further quarter of respondents (24%) are working part-time. Around a fifth (21%) of all those who took the survey describe themselves as working in the home or as a carer. Approx. one in eight (12%) are unemployed with the remaining respondents describing themselves as a student or engaged in casual work.

The majority of parents said their child did not attend a DEIS school, with just 12% of both primary and secondary children stating they attended a designated disadvantaged school. Most parents don't send their child to a fee paying school; however the number of parents with secondary school aged children opting for a fee paying school (21%) is double that of parents with primary school aged children (10%). Parents of children at every stage of primary and secondary school answered the survey with an even spread across the different classes and years.

Survey findings – impact on families

Parents are fed up with school costs and feel the Irish education system is unfair. As costs remain high again this year there is a rise in the number of parents calling on the Government to intervene. Parents

recognise schools are straining under the weight of funding cuts; but equally they know they should not be made shoulder the burden of underfunding. When parents hear the Government mantra of 'free education' it's an insult. They know education is far from free because they are the ones having to pay for it.

"For uniform, books, trips etc. this school year will cost me in excess of €4,500 for my children to get a free education."

"Education should be free and no family should be put in debt or made to struggle financially to have their child educated."

"I feel very strongly that all children should have a free education, and that school should be a level playing field for all."

The backdrop to consistently high school costs is the substantial rise in poverty and deprivation over recent years. More than one in three families are experiencing material deprivation, a huge rise over the last decade.¹ One in nine children now live in consistent poverty.² These figures demonstrate how hard things have got for families because of years of austerity and cutbacks. Cuts to social welfare rates, such as the halving of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, have hit families hard and mean they must tighten their budget elsewhere to be able to afford basic school necessities. A large proportion of parents who answered this year's survey (42%) told us they have to forgo paying household bills or cut back on daily expenses to afford their child's school costs. Many parents also raised the additional financial strain placed on them as their child gets older. Teenage children cost more to clothe and feed, school books and voluntary contributions are usually higher and losing Child Benefit when their child turns 18 years old (while they might still be in full-time education) compounds the additional costs.

"As a registered full-time carer to a child with a disability my earning capacity is zero. My sole income is Social Welfare. The Government's decision to cut Back to School Allowance and the Respite Care Grant together with many extra taxes and levies have had a lasting effect on our family life and on the quality of life of my children."

¹ Barnardos (2015), *Rise Up for Children*

² Department of Social Protection (2016), *Social Inclusion Monitor 2014*

“The €100 Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance does in no way cover the cost for going to school. Every year it keeps driving me further into debt. I have a family of four children, I am a carer and my husband is disabled. Our income is limited but minimal help provided. The Government should do a lot more to address the hidden costs of school.”

In addition to social welfare cuts families are feeling the strain caused by austerity policies elsewhere in their lives and this is negatively impacting their ability to afford to pay their child's school costs. In particular the increasingly high cost and shortage of supply of suitable housing for families is an issue raised by parents this year. Our survey also found around 10% of parents save throughout the year to be able to afford back to school bills. Worryingly a further one in 10 are forced to go into debt to pay their child's school bills; borrowing money off their bank, credit union, family or friends, credit cards and in some cases money lenders to afford their child's education necessities.

“My rent has recently gone up by €150 monthly. We live from week to week. School time is a nightmare situation for me.”

“I receive Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance and use savings which I would have specifically put aside for school but I would borrow the majority of money from family which leaves me in debt coming up to Christmas and this leaves me caught in a vicious circle of having to borrow again.”

Parents see cuts to education funding as cuts to their children's future. They are fed up and angry at being asked time and time again to cover the shortfall in Government funding. The message from parents this year is clear - they want change now.

“It is a disgrace that in 2016 parents are still expected to make up the shortfall created by a serious lack of funding from Government.”

Survey findings – no change in high cost of sending children to school

The survey shows the overall cost of sending a child to school remains high. School books continue to be a substantial cost, particularly for secondary school pupils where they make up on average over 40% of the total costs. An increasing cost in secondary school is the rise in use of expensive digital

technology in schools. Clothing and footwear costs also remain high – potentially out of reach for those relying solely on the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. Voluntary contributions continue to be a huge source of anger, stress and embarrassment for parents. This year we saw the ever increasing amount of additional costs taking their toll on parents who are already pushed to the pin of their collar by school costs.

Snapshot of basic costs for 2015 and 2016

Average costs	Senior Infants pupil		4 th Class pupil		1 st Year Pupil	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
Clothing	€100	€95	€115	€105	€195	€200
Footwear	€50	€45	€55	€50	€60	€65
School Books	€80	€75	€90	€105	€325	€290
Classroom resources	€35	€40	€40	€40	€55	€70
Voluntary contribution	€100	€85	€90	€95	€150	€150
Total*	€365	€340	€390	€395	€785	€775
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€100		€100		€200	

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

Survey findings – uniform costs

Unsurprisingly, uniforms remain the norm in Irish schools. A whopping 98% of parents of secondary school children and 87% of parents with primary school children have to purchase a uniform so their child can attend school. Disappointingly, crested or school branded uniforms are by far the most common. Unbranded uniforms and tracksuits are permitted in the schools of 16% of primary school

parents and just 2% of secondary school parents. Unbranded or generic uniforms are usually substantially less expensive and more easily available than their branded or crested counterparts, so it is disappointing to see the trend towards school-specific uniforms continuing.

“I do agree with school uniforms, but parents should be allowed to buy generic uniforms and iron on crests. We had to choose between food on the table or him wearing a dirty jumper everyday - I choose food.”

Barnardos would welcome a more competitive school clothing and footwear market in the interests of giving parents more choice and reducing costs; however we do not condone any form of unethical labour, in the production of any clothing including uniforms. All manufacturers of school uniforms should 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.

Most parents report their child's uniform costs have risen since last year, with just 48% of primary school parents and 39% of secondary school parents stating there had been no change. Of the parents who reported changes in uniform costs 95% of them told us the costs had risen since 2015, with a significant proportion, nearly one in five, (19%) reporting increases of more than €50 per child.

“Crested uniforms should be done away with. I'm in favour of uniforms but being forced to buy from one overpriced place is wrong.”

In most cases, 82% of primary school parents and 68% of secondary school parents, the school itself hasn't made changes to the uniform so cost increases are indicative of rising prices rather than school policy. Indeed, some parents told us their child's school is taking measures to reduce the cost for parents, such as not requiring both a crested uniform and a tracksuit or having a second hand uniform scheme. Parents are overwhelmingly against crested and branded uniforms. They feel strongly that plain uniforms with no crest would be the most effective way to reduce their costs and rightly point out would have no negative effect on their child's education.

“I agree with a uniform but it should not be branded or only available in one shop. A crest could be ironed onto non-branded uniforms. Crested uniforms are an unnecessary expense and don't help a child learn any better.”

Parents are aware schools set their own uniform policy; but in cases where these policies mean expensive crested uniforms they feel powerless to challenge the school and want the Government to intervene. Parents feel strongly there should be regulations on the type and cost of uniforms required to attend school to guarantee consistency across the system and affordable prices for parents.

“Absolutely shameful that successive governments have chosen to ignore these issues, and hide whilst passing the buck to boards of management. Worse still is the abject refusal of schools to listen to parents around costs, no options to buy generic uniforms and imposing huge financial costs on family. It's high time regulations were put in place and common sense prevailed.”

Footwear is another significant cost for parents when sending their child to school. Most parents of primary school children spent between €40 and €60 on school shoes. Parents of secondary school children most commonly pay €60 to €80 on their child's school shoes. A common complaint is that parents of teenagers often have to buy adult shoes for their children which are more expensive and aren't subject to the same VAT relief as children's shoes.

“It's very difficult when you have three children to put through school and you have very little coming in. Uniforms are ridiculously expensive, both my boys are going into adult size shoes so that even more expensive. I do try charity shops but I'm never that lucky.”

Survey findings – Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

The number of parents making applications for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) remained steady since last year (38% of primary school parents and 53% of secondary school parents), proving it continues to be an important support for many families. Around a quarter of parents who applied reported their application was unsuccessful. Parents report frustration at being at the edge of the cut off for eligibility and many feel the income threshold is simply too high.

“As a part-time employed parent, I do get Family Income Supplement payment but have been deemed as earning too much money for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear allowance. The Government are doing little to nothing about parents on the margins trying to make a better life for their children.”

Parents again expressed frustration this year with the inadequacy of the payment to meet their child's costs. Austerity cut-backs resulted in the payment being halved from €200 to €100 for primary school children and shrinking from €305 to €200 for secondary school children in recent years. These cuts come despite uniform and footwear costs remaining high. Again this year parents are calling for the level of funding to be reviewed and brought in line with real costs. Another issue flagged by parents is problems with the administration of the scheme, with some saying the payment comes too late causing them undue stress.

“Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance has a month long back log. I’m finding it difficult trying to buy bits and pay school this year. I’m afraid the allowance won’t come through before September.”

Survey findings – book costs

This year school books remain a considerable portion of parents' costs when their child is returning to school; a situation which continues to cause much frustration and stress for parents. Parents aren't just unhappy with the cost, they believe school books, as an essential part of their child's education, should be provided free by the State.

“I grew up in Northern Ireland where school books and copy books are free. Why can't we work towards that here?”

Around a third of parents told us there had been no change in the cost of school books since last year. Out of the two thirds of parents who did face a change in the cost of their child's school books since 2015, 91% of them said the cost has risen. The predominance of static and rising prices is a trend we have seen for a number of years.

There is a big disparity between primary and secondary schools when it comes to school books. Primary school books are cheaper, usually costing on average €75-€125 compared to an average of €250-€350 in secondary school. The amount paid by secondary school parents varies greatly. Some parents who answered the survey told us they pay as much as €600 for school books for their child going to secondary school.

A further gap is the low availability of school book rental schemes in secondary schools compared with primary schools, a factor which undoubtedly contributes to the high cost of secondary school books. Of secondary school parents surveyed just 39% said their child's school has a book rental scheme compared with 70% of primary school parents. These figures are static since last year. School book rental schemes are generally seen as a positive feature by parents; however they expressed frustration with the lack of a consistent approach across the school system.

"All schools should run a book rental scheme, the new editions are ridiculous. It's a huge expense. Sort this out Department of Education!"

"I paid over € 100 for books and €45 voluntary contribution but my niece attending a nearby school is the same age but will get ALL of her books included in the €65 contribution her parents pay their school. Why is there this variation to cover the same curriculum?"

For children attending primary schools with a book rental scheme, two thirds of parents pay under €50 for their child's school books while a third of parents pay more than €50. In the small proportion of secondary schools which offer a book rental scheme most parents (55%) pay in excess of €100. Again most parents (70%) state there has been no change to their contribution to the school book rental scheme since last year; yet in cases where there has been a change the overwhelming majority (92%) say the cost has increased since last year. This demonstrates the same trend towards static or rising prices in costs associated with school book rental schemes as we see in overall school book costs.

Teachers most commonly administer school book rental schemes, followed by boards of management and parents. The vast majority (80%) of school book rental schemes have been running for more than two years, with the proportion of newer schemes much higher in primary (15%) than secondary (2%). Most book rental schemes (62% in primary and 70% in secondary) cover textbooks alone. Around a fifth cover textbooks and workbooks, while very few cover everything including stationery. The prevalence of workbooks in primary school again comes in for criticism by parents this year. They are seen as extremely poor value. Parents expressed frustration and consternation at buying books which cannot be reused by their younger children or sold on second hand. In some cases parents are being asked for both workbooks and copybooks for the same subjects which is seen as a waste of money.

“Use of workbooks is crazy, I have four children and none of these books can be passed on, the book rental scheme only covers English readers. I just paid € 127 for a senior infant child and a first class child, NONE of which can be reused as these workbooks are filled in.”

“It drives me crazy that most of my son's school books are workbooks but I still have to buy writing copies and maths copies. At the end of the year, I discovered most of his copies only had a few pages used, why is this? It doesn't make any sense. This needs to stop, every year it gets more expensive.”

Workbooks are seen as a symptom of a broader issue affecting the cost of school books; namely the control book publishers have over book costs. Parents, particularly those with secondary school children, are infuriated by what they see as the ‘constant new editions’ being issued by publishers. This problem is often compounded by changes in text books chosen by teachers.

“I am so frustrated with the constant changing of textbooks. I have an entire cupboard full of both primary and secondary school books that are obsolete and useless to anyone because the school have changed them or need the ‘new edition’ which might have only five pages updated. Such a waste of money and resources instead of being able to pass them on. My children are 24, 16 and 13 and I have been dealing with the same issue for 20 years...time somebody did something!”

Parents’ frustrations come despite the Voluntary Code of Practice among publishers being in place since 2011. The Code prohibits the printing of new editions for a minimum of six years is being adhered to but does not appear to have had the desired impact for parents. The Irish Educational Publishers Association states that in 2015 just 35 titles or 1.3% of all school books underwent revisions and over half of these were due to curriculum change.³ Yet parents feel very strongly book revisions compound the cost of school books and mean they can't be reused by siblings or sold on second hand.

“I feel that the Government should tackle the book companies as there is a constant problem with the issue of schools needing revised version of books which go out of date after two years. It's a ridiculous waste. Book rental schemes should be made compulsory in ALL schools.”

³ Irish Educational Publishers Association (2016)

Survey findings – digital devices

The use of digital devices in school remains relatively uncommon; however this year's survey reveals tablet and laptop use is on the rise in secondary schools. Just 13% of parents with secondary aged children indicated their child used a digital device in school in 2015. The figure almost doubled this year to nearly a quarter (24%) highlighting the changing face of teaching in Irish secondary schools. The figure for primary schools (12%) remained largely unchanged since last year. The implications of the increase in digital device use in secondary schools are acutely felt by parents.

“My son needs an iPad this year. The Government should help pay for it. I'm a single mother and it's costing me nearly € 1,000 to send just my son to secondary school. I also have a daughter going into 3rd year and a daughter going into 4th class to pay for. This is so stressful and I'm finding it hard to cope by myself. I've no one to turn to.”

Three quarters of parents of secondary school children pay for their child's laptop or tablet for use in school. This compares to just 10% of primary school parents. While digital devices can be used in subsequent years they represent a significant outlay at an already expensive time of year. Furthermore, the extra cost of ebooks and software on top of the cost of the hardware means digital devices do not put an end to on-going costs and are not a once off replacement for textbooks.

“Schools using iPads should put pressure to reduce soft copy costs for ebooks. Book publishers are creaming it. It was raised at parent/school meetings with publishers in attendance but we are fobbed off. Some ebooks are not even interactive; they are just a graphic file of the hard copy saved as a pdf.”

Survey findings – voluntary contribution and registration fees

The practice of seeking a donation or 'voluntary contribution' from parents at the start of the school year has become more and more common over the years. This year's survey shows a slight increase in the number of parents who have been asked for a voluntary contribution demonstrating this is a problem which is not going away. The majority of parents (66% in primary school and 79% in secondary school) have to pay a voluntary contribution this year. Most schools (88%) ask for the payment annually in advance of the start of the school year; however a small portion of parents are asked to pay bi-annually, per term or even monthly.

The amount parents pay varies wildly in both primary and secondary school. Most primary school parents pay under €100 but a third pay over €100 with some paying as much as €350. More than half

(55%) of secondary school parents pay over €100 with some parents reporting one off contributions of up to €850. Having multiple children in school compounds the issue for parents many of whom told us they struggle to afford the fee. The overwhelming majority of schools ask for a specific amount with 88% of primary school parents and 94% of secondary parents saying they are expected to pay a set fee. This completely invalidates the notion there is anything 'voluntary' about these contributions.

"The school requests the 'voluntary donation' on the same form that reserves your child's place in the school for the following year!"

"I have four children in secondary school and the voluntary contributions came to €960. I think it is an absolute disgrace that it costs this amount of money before I even buy a book or pencil or uniform."

On the whole parents report the amount sought by schools has not changed since last year; however the majority of schools pursue parents who don't pay their voluntary contribution. This is done in a variety of ways, most commonly by sending general reminder emails, texts or letters to all parents. Some schools send specific reminders to parents who haven't paid and some resort to sending reminders or specific requests via children. Worryingly some schools resort to severe tactics such as denying access to lockers to children whose parents haven't paid the fee. The practice is an extreme source of stress and embarrassment for many parents.

"Voluntary contributions should be exactly that - voluntary. The schools send out repeated letters stating how much each family has to pay. My son's class was told to bring in hand sanitiser and washcloths as there was no soap available for the year in the boy's toilet. So where do the voluntary contributions go if not toward basic necessities such as soap?!"

By and large parents in primary schools weren't asked for a registration fee to secure their child's place in school. Of the 13% of primary parents who paid a registration fee most of them paid less than €50. Registration fees are much more common in secondary schools where more than half (53%) of parents pay them. Most parents paid less than €100 but a significant proportion (39%) paid more than €100 to secure their child's place in school. In 69% of cases parents said the registration fee was non-refundable whereas the minority said it was either refunded or put towards the voluntary contribution at the start of the school term. By not refunding registration fees schools are penalising parents for trying to secure their child a place in school, particularly in areas where places are limited.

“I had to apply to three schools to ensure a place in secondary school but I will not be getting back my registration fees of €340. This does not include the registration fee of the school he will be attending.”

Survey findings – school transport costs

The fees for the Government’s School Transport Scheme were again raised this year as a substantial cost for parents, particularly those living in rural areas. The scheme is available to primary and secondary school pupils; however parents must pay a substantial fee for their children to avail of the scheme. 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). Parents have little choice but to pay the fee which has to be paid by end of July or in two instalments in July and December further adding to the financial strain of sending a child to school.

“I would like the cost of school transport reduced as it has become very high as I have to pay €225 in July and €225 in December for one primary and one secondary school student.”

“The bus, which they have to use as we live over four miles from the school, costs €650 for the year. So my Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is gone before I even look at buying books and uniforms. An absolute scandal and money racket. No idea how I’m going to pay for it all this year without borrowing from family.”

Survey findings – additional costs

When people think of school costs they often think of uniforms, books and school fees and contributions; however, as parents tell us, there are a myriad of additional costs at the beginning of the school term and throughout the school year. One of the most common additional costs is fees for ‘classroom resources’. These fees are in addition to voluntary contributions and cover things like photocopying, stationery and art supplies. Of parents surveyed 72% will pay for classroom resources this year. The amount paid varies substantially but more parents pay between €25 and €50 in primary school and €50-€100 in secondary school. In some instances parents report voluntary contributions being merged with classroom resources; however the same pressures and financial cost seems to apply.

“School is harassing parents for photocopying costs. I often receive three texts a day to 'remind' me I have yet to pay. This is incredible pressure. School has also removed the voluntary contribution from any demand for money and state it's all for photocopying fees, etc.”

Many parents pay for extracurricular activities run by the school, such as swimming or drama classes, or school trips. Unsurprisingly the cost of these activities varies from €20 up to €500 for some secondary school students. Increasingly parents of secondary school children feel pressurised into allowing their child to participate in school trips abroad. While these may seem like luxury items parents know their child wants to join in with their peers, and in some instances the school itself can add to the pressure.

“School trips abroad puts pressure on parents. First school trip abroad is in 1st Year the Christmas after they start which is expensive time. Then further trips in Transition Year and 5th Year which are very expensive.”

“Too much pressure put on parents in relation to school tours abroad. €1,000 needed for all costs including spending money and lunch money which is not included in initial cost.”

Survey findings – Lack of consistency throughout the school system

An overarching theme from this year's survey is the wide variation in costs parents pay from school to school. This is something parents are acutely aware of and know cannot be challenged at school level. Parents feel this lack of consistency throughout the school system is the fault of Government and an issue which must be addressed. Evidence from this survey reveals an astonishing amount of variation in the fees parents pay for everything from uniforms to books to school fees. The Government's assertion that education in Ireland is free perhaps stymies it from tackling what is a glaring problem. It is not just from region to region or even school to school that these costs vary but from class to class too, meaning families can sometimes end up paying significantly more for one child than another in the same school. Parents feel the lack of consistency in education costs is symptomatic of an education system which has inequality and unfairness at its core.

“My son is going into 1st class. I had to pay €55 to the school book rental scheme and an additional €73 for the rest of his books before I buy a uniform etc. My other son is going into junior infants and his

cost before a uniform is €90. One nearby school has a set cost for everything at €60 (not uniform) while another school charges €45 for everything. Why am I paying so much more?"

Government and school responses

Education is the key to opening the door which leads out of poverty, disadvantage and inequality. Children have a right to education.⁴ This right is enshrined in the Irish Constitution, which guarantees State funded, free primary education for all children.⁵ Under the Education Act (1998) the State commits to providing education for every child in the State and recognises economic and social disadvantage prevent students gaining an education.⁶ Yet, as the survey results show, participating in this 'free' education system is expensive.

It is undeniable that school costs have crept up over a number of years. What adds to these costs is the expectation on parents to pay for more and more as, by reducing capitation, the Government pays for less and less. Cuts to State education funding over time have been heaped onto parents by stealth, all the while under the banner of 'free education'.

Ireland's investment in education is 6.2% of GDP, close to the OECD average of 6.1% of GDP, despite having a comparatively young population.⁷ The capitation grant to schools has been cut severely since the onset of the recession. In many cases struggling schools have little choice but to push the shortfall onto parents. Parents across the country tell us they are being asked to pay for essential items such as heating, lighting, soap and toilet rolls. This is an outrageous and unacceptable situation which can only be stopped by national policy changes and restoration of sufficient State funding. While the Programme for a Partnership Government plans to introduce three year capitation funding programmes for schools to allow for greater planning, there is no explicit commitment to an increase in the funding available for beleaguered schools.⁸

⁴ United Nations, (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

⁵ Constitution of Ireland, *Article 42.4*

⁶ *The Education Act 1998, (51)*

⁷ OECD, (2014), *Education at a Glance*

⁸ Programme for Partnership Government, (2016)

“Schools should be funded to ensure there are sufficient resources for all children, including light and heat. The voluntary contribution goes towards paying running costs which I feel should be paid for by the State.”

The Department of Education policy in recent years has been a move towards greater school autonomy. The rationale for such a move is greater democracy, efficiency decentralisation and improving education. Indeed, the Department consulted on a research paper earlier this year entitled ‘Advancing School Autonomy in Ireland’.⁹ A consequence of the Department’s desire for greater school autonomy is that increasingly decisions are being made by schools which dictate parental costs. The result for parents is a price lottery depending on the school your child goes to and in some cases even the class they are in. This unfairness is acutely felt by the parents taking their year’s survey.

“In our area there are three primary schools and all have different costs and the other two schools are cheaper than ours. Surely the children should all be following the same curriculum and costs should be the same?”

Barnardos recognises schools are under ever increasing funding pressure and many schools do everything they can to reduce costs for parents. The survey reflects this with parents telling us how much they appreciate measures taken by schools such as affordable school book rental schemes and plain uniforms.

“Our children’s school handles this funding question very well; no uniform, book rental scheme, totally anonymous voluntary contribution scheme, no charity collections/events allowed in school for fear of strain it may put on families and reluctance to ask for money for once-off events. Only one fundraising activity is held all year where the focus is on the time committed rather than size of contribution and almost every school family helps out.”

In 2013 the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection published a report recommending the Department of Education produce a template for providing free school books on a

⁹ Department of Education and Skills, (2016) *Advancing School Autonomy in Ireland: Research Paper*

phased basis.¹⁰ Unfortunately few recommendations have been progressed to date. The Department of Education began developing a parent and pupil charter a number of years ago. It would compel schools to consult on a range of issues including healthy eating, book rental schemes and use of technology in schools; however it has yet to be published.

Inevitably low income families face the greatest challenges footing the bill for school costs, so already disadvantaged children are at even greater risk of failing to fulfil their potential. Barnardos welcomes the Minister for Education's commitment to tackling educational disadvantage and has made a submission to the Department of Education and Skills on its Statement of Strategy 2016-2018.

Response to addressing uniform costs

In 2013 the Department of Education issued a circular to schools on uniform costs. It called on school management boards, which are responsible for setting school uniform policy, to consult with parents on their views on the school uniform. Unfortunately this initiative produced only very ad hoc changes as uptake by schools was patchy. Ultimately it was unclear what impact parents' views had on Board of Management decisions on uniform policy. What is clear, however, is that guidance from the Department of Education is not enough to make real change to parents' uniform bills and what is needed is a directive which firmly states the parameters for school uniform policy.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) is an important source of support for low income families; however it has been slashed to half its 2011 rate for both primary and secondary school aged children. The current BSCFA rates are €100 for primary school age children and €200 for secondary school age children. As of July 2016, BSCFA has been paid out automatically to 109,000 eligible families for approximately 193,000 children. The Government has allocated a total of €38.8 million for BSCFA in Budget 2016; worryingly that's a cut of 13% compared with last year.¹¹ It remains to be seen what kind of impact this cut will have on families, but with many parents indicating this is a vital resource for them the implications are very concerning. When one considers €90m was distributed under the scheme in 2011 the size of the cut back is clear.

¹⁰ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection, (2013) *Tackling Back to School Costs*

¹¹ Minister for Social Protection (Leo Varadkar), Ceisteanna- Questions- *Dáil Éireann*, vol.817, 30th June 2016

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*

* €29.80 each extra child

Different income thresholds for two-parent and one-parent families mean that one-parent families are often disadvantaged when it comes to applying for BSCFA. Lone parent families are already a vulnerable group so asking them to adhere to stricter eligibility criteria puts these families at an even more heightened increased risk of poverty. Other payments targeted at helping low income families, such as the Family Income Support (FIS), have the same threshold for both lone parent and two parent families. The income thresholds for FIS are outlined below:

Income thresholds for Family Income Supplement

Family Type	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children
FIS income thresholds for both two parent and lone parent families	€511	€612	€713	€834

The income thresholds for FIS were increased in Budget 2016. On the whole they are higher rates than the thresholds for BSCFA. This means that some families on low incomes are excluded from BSCFA despite having been identified as being in need of support via FIS. Having different thresholds disadvantages a small but vulnerable cohort of families, it also makes the social welfare system more complex and difficult to navigate for those most in need.

Response to school book costs

The Government’s response to mounting school book costs is the School Book Grant Scheme. There is €15 million distributed to schools on a per capita basis.

Type of school	Non-DEIS Primary	DEIS Primary	Non-DEIS Secondary	DEIS Secondary
Payment per pupil	€ 11	€21	€24	€39

The Department strongly encourages schools to use this funding to set up a book rental scheme and published its *Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools* in 2013 to this end. While many have set up book rental schemes, principals can distribute the funding at their discretion to those they feel are most in need through the provision of book vouchers or cash, etc. The Government committed a further €5 million in capital funding toward school book rental schemes in Budget 2016. Barnardos was disappointed there was not more meaningful investment in this crucial area.

To further encourage the development of school book rental schemes there was a once-off allocation for primary schools of an additional €15m funding in Budget 2014 to be spread over three years. This School Book Rental Scheme Fund equated to €100 per pupil for non-DEIS primary schools and €150 for DEIS primary schools over the three years. Unfortunately this once-off funding expires this year meaning the sustainability of these schemes must be considered into the future.

In response to the volume of new editions being printed, the Irish Educational Publishers Association established a voluntary Code of Practice in 2011. The Code commits members to guarantee a minimum of four years between text book revisions and to keep older versions in circulation for two years after a new edition becomes available. The code seems to be complied with as Irish Educational Publishers Association survey found only 35 titles out of 2,688 were revised and reprinted in 2015.¹² However parents paint a different picture with the survey findings clearly showing continued frustration. They argue the frequent publication of new editions and switching of books by teachers prevents them from reusing books and subsequently not benefitting from the publishers' code. The code does nothing to prevent the introduction of price increases by publishers or retailers. In 2013 the then Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn intimated the code of practice may become mandatory if not fully implemented, which is something Barnardos would welcome.¹³

¹² Irish Educational Publishers Association, (2016)

¹³ Dáil Debate, 28th May 2013

Response to demand for secondary school places

The Government published its most recent draft of the General Scheme of the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill in June 2016. The draft includes the banning of enrolment and application fees, as well as making schools publish their admission policy and determining what can and can't be used as selection criteria for admission of pupils when a school is oversubscribed. The measures contained in the Heads of the Bill are welcome and will have a positive impact on school age children and their parents. Barnardos made a submission to the Department of Education on the draft Heads of the Bill and is pleased to see the Bill prioritised for progression this year.¹⁴

Response to excessive voluntary contributions

The new Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, has come out strongly in recent months against forced payment of voluntary contributions.¹⁵ In particular the Minister spoke out on school places being subject to supposedly voluntary payments. This is the second year in which Barnardos has included the option for parents to name their child's school should they have concerns over the voluntary contribution sought by the school. School details are passed anonymously to the Department of Education. The Department has promised to follow up with schools to ensure the practice of charging excessive or compulsory 'voluntary contributions' or using aggressive tactics to enforce payment and ensure this practice is stamped out. These measures are welcome; however without greater funding for primary and secondary schools it is likely schools will continue to rely on parents to bridge the funding gap.

Response to school transport costs

Barnardos welcomes the commitment in the Programme for a Partnership Government to review the School Transport Scheme. The review, which is underway and being carried out by the Department of Transport, will make recommendations on concessionary school transport.

Barnardos recommendations

All children deserve a level playing field from which to progress into adulthood with the same opportunities as their peers, regardless of their parent's ability to pay. All parents recognise the importance of education but many parents can't afford to pay what it costs to send their child to school. Parents want their children to have all the advantages in life that education brings but when so many

¹⁴ Office of the Government Chief Whip, (2016) *Legislation Programme Current Session*

¹⁵ Irish Times, (25 May 2016), *Schools forcing 'voluntary contributions' on parents face scrutiny*

are forced to scrimp on necessities or go into debt to afford what is a child's basic right something must be done.

Investment in a child's education not only benefits that child but also the whole of society. Educational disadvantage is closely linked to income inequality. Accessing education leads to greater opportunities, higher incomes and means the beneficiaries contribute more towards our economy. Beyond income there are many benefits to a free education system being available to all children. Education plays a key role in the development of a child's cognitive, social and emotional skills. Evidence shows that education has a strong effect on a child's social outcomes and is a key policy in tackling health, crime and other social problems.¹⁶ In short, an investment in free education is an investment in a better society for everyone.

Cost of free education

Barnardos has compiled the items which are not free under the current education system. These costs make up the bulk of what parents have to pay at the start of each school year. To provide a free education system the Government should fund;

- **School books:** It is estimated the total cost of the school book industry in Ireland is €60 million. Of this, the Government currently funds a School Book Scheme to the tune of €15 million each year. A further €5 million once-off capital funding was allocated in Budget 2016 to set up and run school book rental schemes in all primary schools. Therefore, to ensure every child has free text books and workbooks an additional €40 million in exchequer funding annually is required.
- **Extra school fees and contributions:** Voluntary contributions and paying for classroom resources have been the norm in Irish schools for many years. Far from voluntary, these fees can vary drastically from school to school. Barnardos has calculated parents are currently paying around €89 million in voluntary contributions and €38.5 million to pay for classroom resources across primary and secondary schools.
- **School transport:** More than 100,000 primary and secondary pupils avail of the Government's School Transport Scheme. Despite Government funding of €163.5 million parents still have to

¹⁶ OECD, (2013), Education Indicators in Focus- 2013/01 (January)

pay €100 per primary pupil and €350 per secondary pupil to subsidise the Scheme. Barnardos estimates it would cost in the region of €27.4 million to make the School Transport Scheme free to all; however figures from the Department of Transport suggest it could cost even less to remove the need for parental contributions to the Scheme.

- **Restore capitation grant levels:** Capitation grants are paid to schools on a per pupil basis. These grants are to fund the general running of the school. Since 2010 these grants have been cut by around 15% per pupil putting immense financial strain on schools. Restoring capitation grants to 2010 levels would cost €35.2 million, taking pressure off school resources and ensuring children have the right environment in which to learn.

	Free School Books	Removing Voluntary Contribution	Free Classroom Resources	Free School Transport	Restoring Capitation Grant Level	Total
Current Exchequer Funding	€20m	€0	€0	€163.5m	€287m	€470.5m
Additional cost to make Primary Education free	€20m	€42m	€19.5m	€5m	€16.7m	€103.2m
Additional cost to make Secondary Education free	€20m	€47m	€19m	€22.4m	€18.5	€126.9m
Additional cost to make education free for all children	€40m	€89m	€38.5m	€27.4m	€35.2m	€230.1m

Reduce uniform costs

School uniforms help foster equality among pupils and generate a sense of school identity. For these reasons they are popular with both parents and schools alike. Barnardos recognises uniforms are the most popular choice in schools. While the survey responses show that some schools have taken on board calls to make uniforms more cost effective for parents, many have not and some have even increased the number of crested items piling further cost onto parents' shoulders. While school identity

is important it should never supersede a child's access to education. Barnardos recognises that a school's Board of Management is responsible for uniform policy; however parents tell us they often get nowhere when trying to influence uniform policy at Board of Management level. Controls must be put in place by the Department of Education to regulate the selection of uniforms to ensure a standard, affordable approach is taken in all schools. Barnardos is in favour of targeted measures to help those most at need. The **Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance** is an effort to support parents who simply cannot afford to clothe their children for school without sacrificing basic necessities or going into debt. However, this allowance does not come close to meeting the average cost of a school uniform which is completely unacceptable and must be addressed by the new Minister for Social Protection.

Digital media

The increased use of digital technology, particularly at secondary level, in this year's survey must be taken into account in Government policy. Parents recognise the benefit of using digital technology to support traditional learning methods, but the cost is prohibitive and can lead to further inequality between those who can and can't afford it. Barnardos welcomes the publication of the long awaited Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020, particularly plans to improve wi-fi availability and greater access to devices in classrooms. While schools have autonomy over how their allocation is spent, it is vital they invest in devices and stamp out the practice of relying on parents to pay for expensive hardware. Barnardos recommends the Strategy is reviewed every three rather than five years to keep up with the pace of developments in the digital education sector. Also the 23% VAT applicable to ebooks 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.

Recommendations:

- Uphold a child's constitutional right to free primary education by committing in Budget 2017 to invest an extra €103.2m annually to make it reality for all children.
- Commit to investing €126.9m annually to make secondary education free for all children within next 3 years.
- Issue a Department of Education directive on school uniform policy for all schools placing parameters on schools in determining their school uniform policy which ensure the most cost effective option is prioritised.

- Restore the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance back to the 2010 level. This can be introduced incrementally with a first phase increase of €50 per child at a cost of €14m in Budget 2017.¹⁷
- Synchronise the income thresholds so all family types and all those in receipt of Family Income Supplement are eligible for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.
- Remove the 23% VAT applicable to e-textbooks.

Conclusion

Parents have told us they are at their wits end over school costs this year. Unfortunately this is a situation which has persisted over many years. Piecemeal attempts by the Government to reduce the burden on parents have been wholly inadequate, particularly in the face of the austerity policies of recent years. The only way the Government can make a difference to parents is to invest in wholesale supports which actually fulfil its constitutional promise of a free education. With current public discourse focusing on the end of recession and expanding fiscal space, it is clear now is the time for change. Now is the time to invest in children. We believe our recommendations, if implemented, would finally mean children's access to education would no longer be dependent on their parent's ability to pay.

¹⁷ Minister for Social Protection (Leo Varadkar), Ceisteanna- Questions- *Dáil Éireann*, vol.486, 28th June 2016