

School Costs Survey 2015

Briefing Paper

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Introduction

This is the 10th year of Barnardos' School Costs Survey. Over the last decade the survey has provided a sobering insight into the cost of sending a child to school in Ireland, as well as the strain placed on families in the run up to the new school term each year. Unfortunately this year is no different with the 2015 survey demonstrating that parents are still struggling to meet the cost of uniforms, books and school payments. Ten years on and parents are still worrying about the effect underinvestment in education by the Government is having on their ability to make ends meet and their child's ability to thrive and do well in school.

One of the greatest myths perpetuated by the Government is that education is free for all children. Barnardos' School Costs Survey demonstrates that education is not free. Each year parents must fill the gap in funding to ensure their child can fully participate in school. Education is a crucial factor in a child's development and children spend a sizeable proportion of their life in school. Parents want the best for their children and appreciate the importance of a good education, so if they must make sacrifices elsewhere in the household budget or take out a loan or end up in debt to send their child to school, they do. Asking parents to make these kinds of difficult choices to give their child an equal chance at a bright future is unacceptable and incompatible with our notion of a fair and just modern Ireland.

"The cost of sending a child to secondary school is horrendous. So far equipping our 1st year child has cost us in excess of €800 and that's without buying stationery, shoes, runners, school bag etc. there has to be an answer as we are stretched to the limit trying to educate our children!"

"The expense for secondary school is too much on any parent and even with the €200 back to school allowance I still have to get over €500 myself for books, uniform, locker money & other extras which I had to borrow and then struggle to pay back as I also have three children in primary school. I feel the cost of "free education" in this country is too high and is sending a lot of families like mine further into poverty which I will be struggling to get out of."

Survey design

Barnardos carried out an online survey of parents with school-aged children from 8th to 26th July 2015. This survey was widely advertised via various social media channels and supporters of Barnardos. In total, 1,404 parents completed the survey; 946 with children in primary school, while the remaining 458 respondents' children attend secondary school. While the sample is not statistically representative it does give a strong indication of the types of costs facing parents. 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 school bags or sports equipment.

Survey findings – profile of respondents

Responses to the survey came from every county in the country. Just under a third of all responses came from Dublin, with the next highest rate of responses (28%) from the other counties in Leinster, followed closely by Munster with 27% of the responses.

Respondents were asked about their employment status, with just under a third of all parents indicating they were employed or self-employed full-time and a further quarter indicating they were employed or self-employed part-time. A sizeable proportion of those answering the survey (19% of primary school parents and 16% of secondary school parents) worked full-time in the home or as a carer. About one in eight (13%) of parents with primary school children and 17% of parents with secondary school children described themselves as unemployed. The remaining respondents indicated they are either full-time students or employed in casual work.

The vast majority of parents who answered the survey do not send their children to fee paying schools; however fee paying schools appear to be more popular at secondary level (19%) compared with primary level (9%). Around 10% of respondents have children attending a DEIS school, with an almost even split between primary and secondary schools.

Survey findings – impact on families

The results of the survey clearly show that parents are still struggling under the financial weight of sending their children to school at the start of the school year. The overriding sense from the comments parents made is that they feel stressed, beyond fed up and in despair trying to cope with the costs. They deeply feel the injustice of having to pay so much for their child to access a supposedly free education system. They recognise their child's right to education and are acutely aware that they are being forced to pay for something so fundamental, which they rightly feel should be provided by the State.

“Education is meant to be free and to date I don't see how that can be the true, every child is entitled to education no matter their background and I think it is unfair that parents have to fork out hundreds to get children back to school.”

Despite some moves in recent years by both Government and schools themselves to ease the financial pressure on parents, there is a feeling among parents that not enough is being done. Piecemeal attempts to stem the tide of school costs aren't making a meaningful difference to parents and they want to see comprehensive changes which will only come from increased Government investment in the education system. Parents recognise the importance of investing in education, not just for their own children but also the transformative effect it can have on society.

“Education is at the core of creating a civilized society and all citizens deserve to have access to equal education. Children are our nation's most precious assets - they deserve excellent education and our society's future depends on their ability to learn and grow into decent human beings. Invest in education.”

“Children are the future of every society. If our children are well educated, they will be knowledgeable. Remember Minister that knowledge is health, wealth and power.”

The survey results clearly demonstrate that all families are feeling the strain – not just those on low incomes or in receipt of social welfare supports. There is genuine outrage from working parents that despite being in full-time employment they still struggle to make ends meet at back to school time. While parents who are in receipt of social welfare payments commented about on the strain of paying for their child's education. They describe how this strain seeps into every aspect of their lives and how there is no escape from the worry. A common theme among both working and unemployed parents is the impact that school costs have in the context of other rising costs, such as rent and childcare costs.

“As a full time working professional, I find it a financial struggle to send my children back to school. I really don't know how parents on social welfare cope. I think it's unfair the financial strain parents are under and it should be every child's right to receive the best education to provide for their future.”

“I am a single mother of two on jobseekers payment of €247.60, I live in private rented accommodation and the rent went up last month so I'm paying more rent. The price of sending kids back to school is ridiculous. It's financially impossible for families like mine, the burden is just too much to have to deal with - going to bed worrying about it, waking up worrying about it, worrying about it all through the day, trying to work out which bill do I miss this week to buy a

book or skirt. Every day is like this for me and I'm pretty certain many other families. [In] 2015 it shouldn't be like this. The cost of living and education is rocketing up and income is decreasing."

Parents were asked how they pay/budget for their child's school costs. The majority of parents (44% of primary and 53% of secondary) have to juggle their household budget, forgoing other bills or cutting back on daily expenses, in order to afford paying for things like uniforms, school books and voluntary contributions. Over a third (38%) of parents of primary school children and just under one in five (19%) of parents of secondary school children can afford to pay for school costs without taking a loan, dipping into savings or making sacrifices in their regular household budget. Worryingly one in ten primary school parents and nearly one in five (19%) of secondary school parents have to resort to taking out loans to cover school costs (from friends and family, banks, credit unions, credit cards or moneylenders).

Survey findings – overall costs

The survey shows that the overall cost of sending a child to school have gone up this year compared with last year. 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. It is concerning to see that after plateauing for a number of years, the cost of school books seems to be creeping up again. There has also been a sizeable increase across the board in the value of voluntary contributions being sought by schools. There are some savings, however, in the cost of uniforms and school shoes.

Basic Costs for 2014 and 2015

Average costs	Senior Infants pupil		4 th Class pupil		1 st Year Pupil	
	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015
Clothing	€110	€100	€120	€115	€200	€195
Footwear	€55	€50	€60	€55	€60	€60
School Books	€75	€80	€85	€90	€300	€325
Classroom resources	€30	€35	€40	€40	€50	€55
Voluntary contribution	€75	€100	€75	€90	€125	€150
Total*	€345	€365	€380	€390	€735	€785
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

The vast majority of children going to school must wear a uniform, with 90% of parents with primary school pupils and 98% of parents of secondary school pupils having to buy a uniform. A plain, non-crested uniform can be bought by only 14% of primary school parents and just 1% of secondary school parents. Specific uniforms and tracksuits are more expensive than their generic equivalents and often parents are required to shop in specific retail outlets meaning they don't have the opportunity to shop around. 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.

“Please ban the use of school emblems from uniforms - I hate paying €27 for one crested jumper when I can buy the same style and colour of jumper, without the emblem, for €5! Please ban it completely - it would save my family alone €208 every year.”

“I think all schools should have a plain uniform of a generic colour which can be purchased in high street shops. I think especially for DEIS schools to have a specific uniform with a crest and colour goes against the ethos of DEIS schools and their purpose.”

Barnardos welcomes a 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 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.

This year parents told us the majority of schools (70% of primary schools and 58% of secondary schools) made no change to their uniform in the past 12 months. In schools where changes have been made to uniforms, the changes have been mixed. For those whose schools had introduced changes to the uniform, some reported a decrease in costs due to the introduction of iron-on crests or fewer crested items; however for other parents (36% of primary school parents and 52% of secondary school parents) the changes had resulted in the cost of their child's uniform going up, with many reporting additional crested items being added.

Overall half of all respondents (51% primary school and 49% secondary school) say there has been no change in the cost of their child's uniform. Overall our survey shows school clothing and footwear costs are slightly down from last year, which is welcome; however parents still feel they are too expensive and are fed up with the school-by-school ad hoc approach to uniform policy. Parents favour uniforms but want a standardised review of how they are chosen and a move toward cheaper alternatives by all schools across the board. Without this they feel there can be no equity and some parents will always end up paying over the odds.

“Abolish school specific uniform - it is ludicrous that some parents can avail of cheap uniforms in supermarkets while other uniforms are ridiculously expensive because of colour/school crest etc.”

“School crested uniforms are way over-priced. I suggest sell crest on its own or offer 3-4 companies to give more competitive pricing so it's not monopolised by one shop.”

“Just because I get the back to school allowance, that DOES NOT cover half of what I need to get for my children. I'm expected to fork out €55+ on just her uniform trousers because they have a bit of a sticker on the side. It's ridiculous.”

Survey findings – Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) continues to be a necessary support for many families taking the survey. About two in five (41%) of primary school parents and 55% of secondary school parents have applied for BSCFA. While many parents said it is an important source of income, there is an overwhelming sense the payment is not sufficient to give adequate support to struggling families – especially when the rates have been reduced significantly. The payment has dropped by a half in the case of primary aged pupils from €200 to €100 per school year and from €305 to €200 for secondary aged pupils; this despite the average cost of school clothes and shoes remaining significantly higher. These parents are expected to bridge the gap although they are already identified as low income by virtue of being in receipt of the payment. This is simply too much for some families and they are forced into debt to make up the shortfall. As in previous years some parents are critical of the tight eligibility criteria for BSCFA, having been excluded from assistance because they are over the income threshold, which doesn't take things like rent or mortgages into account.

“The €100 grant does only cover the cost of tracksuit and a pair of shoes. I have four children and the money provided doesn't even begin to cover the cost. I am a student at college and my husband is disabled, so we are on minimum income. There should be more help towards school.”

“As a stay at mother to four children, two in secondary and two in primary, the cost is huge. My husband has a minimum wage job. We get no help. Have applied for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear allowance and never get it. We are over the wage threshold by €10. Surely there has to be some help for getting kids back to school. Free education now that's a joke!!”

Survey findings – book costs

The response by parents is clear and overwhelming – school book costs are too high and should not be borne by parents. This has been a common theme throughout the 10 years Barnardos has been running the School Costs Survey and this year parents’ anger and exasperation resounds. This is particularly true for parents of secondary school pupils; not surprising when many parents report the cost of their child’s secondary school books exceeds €300. Children entering into the junior and leaving cert cycles in first and fifth year have particularly expensive school book shopping lists. Almost half (47%) of parents with children entering first year and 29% of parents with children entering fifth year say their school books cost in excess of €300.

“I'm on my own with two teenagers going into first year and fifth year. Their new books have come to €700 alone. I work part time and spend months worrying about how I'm going to afford getting them back to school. I cut back as much as I can to the point I don't do much of a grocery shop and try to manage on basic food.”

School book costs are generally static or on the rise, with an even split between parents who haven’t seen any change in their child’s school book costs (47% in both primary and secondary) and parents who report book costs increasing (48% in primary and 42% in secondary). At primary level, costs remain between €76-100, but on average are slightly higher than last year; however there continues to be a wide disparity between book costs within primary level, with some parents stating they pay €26-€50 and others paying more than €150. It is clear book choice comes into play here with some schools making more of an effort than others to keep costs down. Workbooks continue to be a source of frustration at primary level, with parents questioning their merit and cost effectiveness as they cannot be recycled.

“Please, please, please remove workbooks from the curriculum! My second child is starting in Junior Infants two years after my first child and I am buying the same 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 according to some parents despite being in operation since 2011. A survey by the Irish Educational Publishers Association found that in 2014 just 20% of all school book titles underwent price increases and only 63 titles out of a total of 2,544 were revised (mainly due to curriculum changes).¹ However, parents are not seeing the benefits as the real cost for parents continues to rise and they feel strongly that book selection and revision is to blame.

“Stop the reprinting of books. The third edition is basically same as the second edition, just some chapters move and school insisted on new ones.”

“I have three girls at the same school and cannot pass down their books because they change from year to year. Also workbooks costs so much and are not even used a lot of the time.”

Parents are in favour of school book rental schemes. The survey tells two different tales in terms of their rollout in schools. Barnardos is pleased that again this year there is an increase in the number of parents (70%) able to avail of primary school book rental schemes. This is a very welcome development given the equivalent figure was just 50% in 2012 and is evidence that investment by the Department of Education is working. Unfortunately just 37% of secondary school parents have the same opportunity, despite their children’s books being the most costly item in our survey.

“Book rental scheme should be mandatory. Disappointing to see this has not been rolled out everywhere.”

Where school book rental schemes are in operation, parental contributions at primary level are mostly between €0 and €50, with just 22% of parents paying more. At secondary level parental contribution varies between €50 and more than €150 reflecting the higher cost of secondary school books. At both primary and secondary level the parental contribution has stayed the same since last year (65%); however it is concerning to see that for approx. 20% of parents the amount they must contribute has

¹ Irish Educational Publishers Association (2015)

gone up in the last 12 months. Given increased State investment in school book rental schemes this is not the trend one would expect to see.

“The book rental scheme is good to have but is still expensive. I have paid €150 each year for three years to Junior Certificate level. I have paid €450 on books which I think is more expensive than if I purchased the books at the start of first year and made a once off payment. This €450 I have paid is for books and does not include stationery, copy books (many of which are hard back copies) or exam papers.”

“Our school book rental scheme is a lifeline to me. It covers everything – books, workbooks and stationery. Instead of being stressed about the high costs I know in April my fee will be €70 and I can save it up and pay it like any other parent so my child is treated the same as everyone else in his class.”

There is wide variance in what is covered under these schemes which can explain the differing fees parents have to pay to participate. Three in five parents report their child’s school book scheme just covers textbooks alone, with one in five saying it covers textbooks and workbooks. One in 10 primary school parents state their child’s book rental scheme covers everything (textbooks, workbooks and all stationary) compared to less than 2% of parents with children in secondary school. This national disparity in access to schemes and what is covered in them benefits some and puts others at a disadvantage, perpetuating inequality. Again, parents highlight the need for a standardised approach to ensure sustainable and equitable access to school book schemes for all students, no matter their ability to pay.

“I think that a book rental scheme should be introduced in all schools. I think that the cost of books should be supplemented by the Department of Education.”

While most parents were unsure who ran their school book rental scheme, around one in four primary and secondary parents said teachers are responsible for the scheme. Of the parents who did know, they said 19% of schemes in primary schools are run by the parents’ association and 9% run by the school board of management. These figures are reversed for secondary school with 8% of parents saying the parents’ association manages their child’s scheme and 14% saying the school board was responsible. Although parents say the majority of school book rental schemes have been up and

running for between two and five years, others have been operational for five years or more. Interestingly parents report that the last two years has seen 19% of school book rental schemes set up in primary schools, but less than 2% in secondary schools. Barriers to new school book rental schemes include lack of resources, use of digital devices, the broad range of subjects in general and changes to the Junior cycle.

Survey findings – digital devices

Use of tablet and other devices remains relatively uncommon with just 11% of primary school parents and 13% of secondary school parents telling us their child uses a device in the classroom. These findings reflect a Barnardos survey on the use of digital technology in schools carried out earlier this year. That survey found other devices, such as interactive white boards, were used more commonly in the classroom than tablets.² When it comes to providing tablet devices plus apps and software the picture painted by primary and secondary school parents is very different. Around 80% of primary school parents whose children use tablets in school say their child's school provides the device and the software. In contrast, secondary school parents say just 25% of schools pays for the device and 41% pay for the software. Parents surveyed recognise the benefit of digital devices in supporting traditional learning methods; however without a standardised approach to their use, supply and how they are taught there is a substantial risk of marginalising children and perpetuating inequalities. Parents also raised the issue of e-books not being VAT exempt and would like to see this measure introduced. What is evident from the survey results and comments from parents is that schools differ in their approaches to digital technology.

“Schools making it mandatory for an iPad for kids is crazy. Stop the iPad or support the cost of the iPad.”

“Introduce a scheme where kids use iPads or tablets instead of workbooks. It's less strain on their back and it can be used from juniors up to sixth class.”

²Barnardos, (2015), Digital Technology in Schools Survey

Survey findings – voluntary contribution and registration fees

Voluntary contributions continue to be a burden for parents and this year the costs have gone up across the board in primary and secondary. The number of parents being asked for a voluntary contribution remains very similar to last year, with 65% of primary school parents and 73% of secondary school parents being asked to contribute. Almost all parents are asked to contribute in September every year, with less than 10% of parents reporting more frequent requests. Primary school contributions vary greatly; however two in five parents are paying more than €100 per school year. The wide variance in the amount sought by primary schools possibly reflects the voluntary nature of the contribution, with schools asking parents to contribute what they can afford. In secondary schools two thirds of parents say they are paying over €100 each school year, with a quarter paying more than €200 this year. This is a huge burden on parents, especially considering many have more than one child in secondary school.

“Will somebody please do something to stamp out voluntary contributions? We didn't have money to buy food for a few days last year because of the contribution, even at that we couldn't afford to pay it all. We got letters, texts and e-mails asking for the rest of the money for weeks after, we were afraid every day that our son was going to be singled out over it and we ended up selling some of our things to pay it off for fear that he would suffer over it. This year we have managed to get a loan from Provident to cover it, but it will take 12 months to pay that back and it'll have gone full circle by then and we'll have to get a loan again for the next year.”

“Please increase the capitation grants per child as primary education is shamefully underfunded by government. The schools are being made out to be pariahs for asking for voluntary contributions but in reality, it is difficult to keep the lights on and the toilets flushing without the generosity of parents.”

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 (37% of parents with primary school children and 48% with secondary school children) or sending reminders home via children (21% of parents with primary school children and 15% of secondary school children). Parents also report penalties for their children should they not pay, including not allowing their child access to a school locker.

“We both have good jobs but we are broken by school related costs. There seems to be no understanding of this by the school. Last year the school, as it didn't get enough voluntary contributions did not provide toilet paper for the students for a term!!!!”

“Why is the contribution fee so high? We have to pay €80 or my child will get no locker and as it's important for them not to haul heavy books on their backs, we are being pressurised to pay this fee.”

The practice of charging registration fees is much more prevalent in secondary schools than primary schools according to the survey. Less than one fifth of primary school parents reported having to pay a registration fee, compared with half of secondary school parents. Where registration fees are charged in both primary and secondary the amounts vary wildly from less than €25 to more than €250. Most commonly parents of primary school pupils are asked to pay between €25 and €50 and parents of secondary pupils are asked to pay between €75 and €100. Whether or not this registration fee is refunded once a child starts school depends on the individual school policy. Around half of all parents didn't receive their child's registration fees back despite enrolling their child in school.

Survey findings – additional costs

As the survey demonstrates parents are pushed to the pin of their collar by school costs, yet on top of clothing, book and school fees there are additional hidden expenses they are required to cover. Almost 90% of parents of primary school children and 70% of parents of secondary school children are required to pay for classroom resources such as stationery and photocopying. Again, the amount sought by schools varies. Most parents, both of primary and secondary school children, state they pay between €25 and €50 per school year for these resources; however some parents report costs exceeding €100. How schools determine these fees is unclear, but yet again it is an example of inequity across the school system with some parents being charged much higher fees than others. It also another indication of the impact of underinvestment in the education system and the expectation that parents will make up the deficit.

“Extra money had to be paid for woodwork and art - €70. The teachers in the school kept hounding my son every day, even though I sent a note saying I couldn't afford it. In return he was hounding me and in the end I had to pay it and not pay my rent for a week.”

Survey findings – School transport costs

Transport to school continues to be a problem for many parents – particularly those living in rural areas. The Government’s school transport scheme is available to primary and secondary school pupils, however parents must pay a fairly hefty 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). 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.

“Another cost that impacts us personally is [the] bus ticket. We will have to pay €650 this year. This is a massive amount at a time I'm trying to organise books and uniforms. There will be no camps or holidays this year as it's costing us €2,500 to send five children back to school. Two in secondary and three in primary, and that's free schooling!”

“With two children in secondary this year our total cost to return them to school in September is €1,789. This includes transport with Bus Eireann to the cost of €650. We live rurally and only have one car which my husband uses for work. I am unemployed at present because of high childcare costs and the need to afford a second car to return to work.”

Survey findings- Ten years’ of the School Costs Survey

Barnardos has carried out its School Costs Survey every year since 2005. The last decade has seen much change in Ireland with the country going from a period of unequalled prosperity into one of the deepest recessions in the history of the State. Since the first School Costs Survey there have been five different ministers for education from four different governments. Yet from boom to bust and regardless of which government was in power, the pressure of school costs has remained a constant for parents. Below is a comparison of some of the key school costs from the start of the survey in 2005, the peak of Ireland’s fiscal prosperity in 2008 and the latest survey results from 2015.

Average* costs	Senior Infants pupil			4 th Class pupil			Secondary School Pupil		
	2005	2008	2015	2005	2008	2015	2005	2008	2015
Clothing	€105	€140	€100	€135	€160	€115	€190	€225	€195
Footwear	€35	€40	€50	€45	€60	€55	€55	€100	€60
School Books	€110	€75	€80	€140	€105	€90	€250	€300	€325
Total	€250	€255	€230	€320	€325	€260	€495	€625	€580

*2005 figures rounded to the nearest €5

The table above illustrates the variation in the cost of clothing, footwear and books over the last ten years. Despite a reduction since peak times in 2008, costs have remained largely static overall. The trajectory of school costs over the last ten years broadly replicates the trend in average disposable income during the same period which saw a peak in 2008 and a sharp decline thereafter. The latest EU SILC figures for 2013 indicate that disposable income rates have returned to approximate 2005 levels. However, while school costs have declined and income levels recover, the number of people experiencing deprivation has risen sharply from 19% in 2005 to 31% in post-recession Ireland. Deprivation rates are calculated on the number of people who experience two or more types of enforced deprivation (unable to afford things like a warm waterproof coat, two strong pairs of shoes, to keep their home adequately warm). Worryingly the current deprivation rate for families who have children is much higher at 37%, and we know approx. 138,000 children (or nearly one in eight) are living in consistent poverty in Ireland today.

Clothing and footwear continue to be a considerable cost at the start of each school year. The targeted support for families on low incomes, the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, has varied significantly during the past 10 years, peaking during 2008-2011. However because it has been

severely cut back in recent years, in real terms families who are most in need of assistance are no better off now than they were 10 years ago.

	2-11 years			11-18 years		
	2005	2008	2015	2005	2008	2015
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€80	€200	€100	€150	€305	€200

The costs of school books has changed over the last 10 years with some parents seeing a reduction in the price of primary school books during this period, perhaps reflecting the introduction of and investment in school book rental schemes. Unfortunately a reverse trend has emerged at secondary school level with costs going up. It is clear the overall costs remain a significant burden on parents with little progress to overhaul the (expensive) status quo.

Government and school responses

In recent years there has been increased political attention paid to the issue of school costs. As a result of Barnardos consistently highlighting the problem faced by parents each year, as well as pressure from other children’s charities, the media and parents themselves, politicians and policy makers have started to take note.

In 2013 the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection published a report on the issue *Tackling Back to School Costs* outlining a series of recommendations. Barnardos particularly welcomed the recommendation that the Department of Education produce a template for providing free school books on a phased basis. Unfortunately not many of the recommendations have been progressed so far. The Department of Education itself undertook to develop a parent and pupil charter which would compel schools to consult on a range of issues including healthy eating, book rental schemes and use of technology in schools. Commenced last year, it is hoped this charter will be published in advance of the start of the 2015/2016 school year.

While the increased public focus on school costs has resulted in some schools effecting changes to reduce parental costs, these moves are ad hoc and many parents have still not benefitted from lower school costs. Without national policy adjustment it is impossible to guarantee real and meaningful changes for parents across the board, no matter which school their child attends. Just as policy change is required to ensure a fair and equitable system, statutory investment is needed to plug the gap in education resources that parents are currently filling. Not only are parents paying out large lump sums at the start of each school year, they are also being asked to fork out cash payments to schools in the form of voluntary contributions or (and in some cases as well as) fundraise to ensure their child's school is adequately resourced throughout the school year.

Ireland's investment in education is 6.2% of GDP, close to the OECD average of 6.1% of GDP, despite having a relatively young population. Investment in children's education is an investment in Ireland's future economic and social prosperity. Ploughing resources into third level education while underfunding primary and secondary education as the Irish Government consistently does is an imbalanced allocation of education resources.³ A person without education is like a building without foundations; without the basic building blocks of high quality, accessible primary and secondary education, Ireland will produce fewer and poorer quality graduates down the road and short change its future generations.

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 ad hoc changes as uptake by schools was patchy and 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 of school uniform policy.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) helps thousands of low income families with the cost of buying school clothes each year. There are strict eligibility criteria and in recent years the rate paid has decreased substantially. The current BSCFA rates are €100 for primary school age

³ OECD, (2014), *Education at a Glance*

children and €200 for secondary school age children. So far in July 2015, BSCFA has been paid out automatically to 105,000 eligible families for approximately 200,000 children. The Government has allocated a total of €44.3m for BSCFA in Budget 2015. This is a fraction of the €90m paid out under the scheme in 2011. Applications are still being processed and the Department have received more than 20,000 new applications by mid-July. ⁴

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 makes no sense and puts these families at a 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 the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

Family Type	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children
FIS income thresholds for both two-parent and lone- parent families	€506	€602	€703	€824

The income thresholds for FIS are set at 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

⁴ Department of Social Protection, 2015

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

There has been a mounting chorus of concern from parents regarding the high cost of school books since the first Barnardos' School Costs Survey 10 years ago. In response to this outcry the Department of Education's policy to tackle the problem has been to finance the School Book Grant Scheme. A budget allocation of €15m has been set for 2015/2016 and all schools receive a portion of this on a per capita basis. This is broken down as per the table below:

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.

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. This money was allocated as an incentive for primary schools to set up school book rental schemes. However, excluding schools that had already set up a book rental scheme from the funding stream was unpopular as many felt children in schools with existing schemes in place were being unfairly left out. It transpired that demand for the funding under the original rules was lower than expected and remaining funding was made available to all primary schools with pre-existing school book rental schemes. As this funding is above and beyond what is available in the School Book Grant Scheme, it means schools receive €29 per pupil in total in non-DEIS primary and €41 per pupil in total in DEIS primary schools to assist with cost of school books.

Unfortunately this once-off funding will expire soon so issues of sustainability of these schemes need to 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 committing its 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 version becomes available. The code appears to be complied with as Irish Educational Publishers Association survey found only 63 titles out of 2,544 had been revised and reprinted in 2014⁵. However, parents' experiences paint a different picture. Barnardos' survey clearly shows parents are still angered 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 the publishers' code. In 2013 the then Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn intimated that the code of practice may become mandatory if not fully implemented.⁶ Also the code does nothing to prevent the price being charged by publishers or retailers going up.

Response to demand for secondary school places

In spring of this year the Government published a revised draft of the General Scheme of the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill. The revised 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; however as the Bill is in draft form with no formal consultation undertaken at time of writing, there will be no relief for parents in the immediate future. Without legislative change it is unlikely that the practice of charging fees for school admission and enrolment will end in any meaningful way. Barnardos has submitted its feedback on the draft Heads of the Bill to the Department of Education and would like to see this Bill prioritised to pass through the Oireachtas following the summer recess.

⁵ Irish Educational Publishers Association preliminary findings, July 2015

⁶ Dáil Debate, 28th May 2013

Barnardos Recommendations

Free education for all children

Children have a right to education.⁷ This right is enshrined in the Irish Constitution, which guarantees the State provide for free primary education for all children.⁸ 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.⁹ Yet as our survey clearly shows education in Ireland is not free year and the financial burden placed on parents is not equitable. Barnardos has calculated that a relatively modest investment (in light of the country's improving fiscal circumstances) could guarantee free primary and secondary education for all children. A detailed list of costs that are not covered under the current education system can be found at the end of this paper (Appendix A). 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 as part of the once-off funding was allocated in the 2014/2015 school year for setting up and running school book rental schemes in all primary schools. Therefore to ensure every child has free text books an additional €40 million in exchequer funding annually is required. This could be facilitated through an extension of the School Book Rental scheme. In other EU countries, such as Sweden and the UK, state funded school books are the norm. The transition to an entirely free school book system was also recommended by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection report on school costs in 2013.¹⁰ As part of the move towards this model Barnardos would like to see more formal regulation of the revision of school books – with limits on the price of books and the frequency of revisions included in school book publisher tenders for State contracts.

⁷ United Nations, (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

⁸ Constitution of Ireland, *Article 42.4*

⁹ *The Education Act 1998, (51)*

¹⁰ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection report, *Tackling Back to Schools Costs*, 2013

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, Barnardos' survey shows these fees vary drastically from school to school and are on the rise. We estimate parents are paying around €89 million in voluntary contributions and €38.5 million to pay for classroom resources across primary and secondary schools. Year on year these fees cause outrage and anger among parents who feel the unfairness of having to supplement Department of Education funding to 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 pay €100 per primary pupil and €350 per secondary pupil to subsidise the Scheme. It would cost in the region of €27.4 million to make the School Transport Scheme free to all.

Restore capitation grant levels

Capitation grants are paid to schools on a per pupil basis 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. These cuts have resulted in schools having to cut costs dramatically, placing pressure on staff and putting the quality of education children receive at risk. As the School Costs Survey demonstrates, parents have been expected to make up the shortfall through charging additional fees and/or fundraising. Schools should be properly financed by the Exchequer so parents are not expected to pay for the shortfall. Restoring capitation grants to 2010 levels would cost €35.2 million taking pressure off school resources and making sure children have the right environment in which to learn.

Recommendations:

- Uphold a child's constitutional right to free primary education by committing in Budget 2016 to invest the extra €103.2m annually required 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.

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 and the survey responses clearly show that some schools have taken on board previous calls to make uniforms more cost effective for parents; however 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 controls should 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 school children 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.

Recommendations:

- Department of Education should issue a directive on school uniform policy for all schools placing parameters on schools when reviewing their individual uniform policy to consider changes from a value for money perspective.
- Restore the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance back to the 2010 level. This increase can be introduced incrementally with a first phase increase of €50 per child costing €15m in Budget 2016.
- 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.

Digital media

The ad hoc approach to digital technology in schools is letting parents and children down. Parents recognise the benefit of using digital technology to support traditional learning methods, but the lack of a coherent, operational strategy risks perpetuating existing educational inequalities as well as creating

new ones. A National Digital Strategy for Education which tackles inequity of access and introduces standardised approach to learning through digital technology must be finalised and implemented as a priority. It must include low cost, robust devices designed specifically for the school market. The model should be not-for-profit and promote equity of opportunity across Ireland's education system. The Department of Education must carry out regular reviews of the strategy once it's implemented to keep up with the fast pace changes in digital technology. 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.

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.
- Adequately resource implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Conclusion

The survey has highlighted the stress, sacrifice, debt and even peril they are placed in to pay for their child's schooling. That parents are being forced into these lengths to give their child access to a supposedly free education is a scandal. Irish children have a right to education.¹¹ This right is enshrined in the Irish Constitution, which guarantees the State provide for free primary education for all children.¹² The Government has indicated that Budget 2016 will see an Exchequer surplus for the first time in a number of years.¹³ Now is the time to support families who are struggling under the financial burden of sending their child to school and to invest in the future of Irish children. We believe our recommendations, if implemented, will make huge strides in ending educational inequalities. We must ensure all children have access to a free, high quality education system, unencumbered by their parent's ability to pay.

¹¹ United Nations, (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

¹² Constitution of Ireland, *Article 42.4*

¹³ Minister for Finance (Michael Noonan), *Dáil Éireann*, 28th April 2015

Appendix A: Cost of Free Education

	Free School Books	Removing Voluntary Contribution	Free Classroom Resources	Free School Transport	Restoring Capitation Grant Level	Total
2014/2015 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