

Tackling the Costs of Education

Ag dul i gcoinne
an chostas d'Óideachais

Sinn Féin



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Introduction | Réamhrá

The Irish constitution provides for the right of every child to receive free primary education. This fundamental right recognises the importance of education as a means of improving life outcomes for individual children as well as critical to the development of society and the economy.

Despite this fundamental constitutional principle, it is becoming increasingly clear, that education in this state is anything but free. Research from St Vincent De Paul, Barnardos and the Irish League of Credit Unions shows that the costs of textbooks, uniforms, school transport and voluntary contributions are placing a very real and prohibitive financial burden on parents each year.

The most recent survey by the Irish League of Credit Unions shows that Back to School costs have increased and 72% of parents surveyed stated that they found the back to school spend to be a financial burden. 27% stated that the costs will impact on their ability to pay household bills and 29% of parents indicated that they will get into debt to fund back to school spend.

These figures are particularly worrying as figures show an increase in child poverty rates in Ireland over the past number of years. The TASC “Cherishing All Children Equally” report 2016 shows that the rate of children living in consistent poverty almost doubled from 6.3% to 11.2% in 2014. Meanwhile the share of 0-16 year-olds at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2014 is 29%, above the EU average of 27%.

The prohibitive cost of education places an additional burden on families, many of whom are already struggling to meet every day living costs. For some particularly disadvantaged families, education is not seen as a route out of poverty and deprivation, but as an unaffordable strain on the family finances. Figures show that almost 10% of all young people do not complete secondary education and there can be no doubt that the cost of education in terms of both financial outlay and the cost of foregoing of income opportunities for older teenagers contributes significantly to this statistic.

Government Policy | Polasaí an Rialtas

Under the Education Act 1998 the state commits to providing education for every child and recognises the economic and social disadvantages preventing children gaining an education. Unfortunately, the reality is somewhat different and Government policy, particularly the implementation of austerity by Fianna Fáil and then Fine Gael and Labour, has hugely contributed to this problem.

Since 2008, the primary source of funding to cover the running costs of schools, the capitation grant, has been cut by 11%. This means that many primary and secondary schools struggle to pay for essential services such as heat and light. Furthermore, the ability of schools to fund classroom resources such as printing/photocopying, art supplies and other materials has significantly reduced and, in many cases, parents have been burdened with making up the shortfall through voluntary contributions and other fundraising activities.

While the increase in the back to school allowance, announced in last year’s budget is welcome, it still is highly inadequate to meet the costs of back to school for parents. This level of payment is wholly inadequate in meeting the real costs of Back to School for many low-income families, who must meet these costs from other sources of income. Figures from 2016 show that over 109,000 families rely on the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance on an annual basis to help meet the costs of sending their children back to school. Sinn Féin proposes restoring the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to 2011 levels.

In 2013, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills published a cross –party report on Tackling Back to School Costs. The report made a number of recommendations in the areas of culture change, school leadership, voluntary contributions, school books, curricular and extra-curricular activities and uniform costs. To date, few of these recommendations have been progressed in any meaningful manner.

In 2016, the Department of Education published a circular stating that the Minister for Education was considering introducing a policy whereby schools who made attempts to reduce school costs for parents would receive an enhanced level of capitation payment. While this does show a willingness on the part of the Minister to address the problem, unfortunately little detail has been made available as to the level of capitation payable; the specific criteria to qualify for the enhanced payment; the monitoring mechanism for compliance with the circular or indeed if any schools have signed up to the proposal. Given the failure of the current government to make any attempt to restore capitation cuts in Budget 2017, it is not clear if schools are taking the proposal seriously and there is no evidence of the significant buy-in from schools to make the proposal successful.

School Uniforms | Éide Scoile

According to research by Barnardos the average spend on school uniforms ranges from €170 for a primary school pupil to €255 for a secondary school pupil. The majority of schools require children to be dressed in school uniform to attend school. The research shows that crested or school branded uniforms are the most common and there is no requirement on schools to allow generic or unbranded items. According to the Barnardos Uniform Costs Survey, 83% of parents state they have to buy a crested uniform or tracksuit.

In 2013, the Department of Education and Skills issued a direction to schools to consult with parents on the issue of school uniforms. The Department provided a template questionnaire for the purposes of this engagement. A survey by Barnardos indicates that almost half of parents did not receive the survey and a number referred to the fact that the option of cheaper uniforms was not dealt with adequately by the questionnaire. The Department of Education did not collect the survey responses; therefore, there is no data on the number of schools that issued the questionnaire or the results received.

Currently, it is the role of the Board of Management of a school to establish the uniform policy of the school. Parents have expressed frustration generally in relation to the lack of consultation and the lack of power to change the current system. The Minister for Education has recently sent a circular to all schools on the issue of school uniforms requesting that schools make generic school uniforms available; that the costs of uniforms be detailed in advance to parents and that parents be widely consulted in the development of uniform policy.

While this is certainly a step in the right direction, the circular does not place an onus on any school to actually implement the measures outlined within. Furthermore, there is no mechanism established whereby compliance with the circular can be established and monitored. The Minister has indicated that the upcoming Parent and Student Charter Bill will address this matter more comprehensively, placing a statutory obligation on schools to “Consult students and parents regularly in relation to school costs and working to avoid costs acting as a barrier to participation.”

It could be argued that the Parent and Student Charter Bill proposals are too vague and only place an obligation on schools to consult on the issue of school costs, with no clear obligation to work to reduce them.

It is worth noting that the School Admissions Code 2012 in England places a statutory requirement on all schools to ensure that their policies do not disadvantage any child and places an obligation on schools to limit the expense of uniforms by making sure that they are available in multiple sources. Extensive guidance has also been issued to schools in England on the principles to be employed in developing school uniform policy, advising of means of reducing the costs for parents.

Sinn Féin Proposes:

- All schools should be legally required to produce a dress code or school uniform policy and this should be established by amendment to the Education Act 1998.
- Schools should be legally obliged to consult with parents in determining school uniform policy or dress code policy – this could be achieved by stipulating it in either the Education Act 1998 or the Parent and Student Charter Bill.
- Statutory guidelines should be established for the development of school uniform policy and provision should be made for the Minister to produce such guidelines under the Education Act 1998.
- The principle of ensuring school uniforms are affordable should be established on a statutory footing similar to the School Admissions Code in England.
- Statutory guidelines must include an obligation to provide generic school uniforms where it is clear that there is sufficient demand from parents.
- The Department should establish a mechanism to ensure that the obligations of schools in this area are monitored and implemented.
- That powers should be extended to the Ombudsman for Children in order to investigate and make recommendations in relation to the complaints of the failure of schools to comply with requirement to reduce school uniform costs.

School Books | Leabhair scoile

According to Barnardos, the average cost of school books per child ranges from €75 for a primary school pupil to €290 for a secondary school pupil. According to the survey, for many parents the cost of school books remains static or has risen in recent years.

Figures from the Department of Education and Skills show that while 95% of primary schools operate a school book rental scheme, just 65% of secondary schools operate such a scheme. Given the fact that secondary school books are by far the most expensive, the lack of widespread operation of book rental schemes is particularly disappointing.

Furthermore, the study by Barnardos indicates a lack of consistency across schools that do operate a school book rental scheme. Some parents report paying under €50 for the scheme while others pay more. Some schools cover textbooks only while others include textbooks, stationary and workbooks.

The extensive use of workbooks has been a key concern of parents as these can often not be purchased second hand and represent extremely poor value for money. The Joint Oireachtas Report on Tackling School Costs recommended that the use of workbooks should be discontinued in all schools.

Despite the fact that the Irish Educational Publisher’s Association has signed up to a voluntary Code of Practice to guarantee a minimum of four years between text book revisions and also to provide text books at a substantial discount to schools wishing to establish school book rental schemes, the price of books remains stubbornly high. According to Barnardos, parents argue that the code does not prevent schools from deciding to use a different textbook nor does it prevent the increase in prices by retailers or publishers.

Sinn Féin proposes:

- The Department of Education should carry out an annual survey of school book rental schemes in the school census so that data on the operation and scale of such schemes can be maintained with a view to achieving more consistency across schools.
- The Department should review the arrangements with educational publishers, particularly in relation to the operation of the voluntary code of practice and the promise to provide text books at a discount to schools. A new mandatory code of practice should be established if necessary.
- The Department should issue guidelines to schools on the use of workbooks and the circumstances in which schools may consider changing textbooks, with a view to reducing these where possible to create savings for parents.
- Funding for School Book Schemes should be increased over the next five years to a budget of €60 million by 2022. It is estimated that the total value of the school book market is €60 annually, therefore this increase in funding would provide free schoolbooks to all children in line with the recommendation of the Joint Oireachtas Report.

Voluntary Contributions | Dréacht Dheonach

The practice of schools seeking voluntary contributions has become widespread in recent years. A recent study by Barnardos showed 66% of parents of children at primary school and 79% of parents of children at secondary school are requested to pay a voluntary contribution.

The average contribution is between €100 and €150 per child and the specific amount is often stipulated on the same form as the child's enrolment information.

The same report by Barnardos stated the majority of schools pursue parents who do not pay their voluntary contribution. In some cases, reminders are sent by email, text or letters with some schools even sending reminders of requests for payment through children. The study stated in some cases the children of parents who refuse to make voluntary contributions are denied access to facilities such as lockers until the money is paid. Parents reported feeling pressured and embarrassed into paying these contributions on an annual basis.

The Joint Oireachtas Report states that some schools require these payments to be made upon acceptance of a school place or at the beginning of a school year, while some require it upon application for a school place. In some cases, it is not made clear to parents that these contributions are voluntary and there is no obligation to pay them. This report recommended that the practice of requesting voluntary contributions be discouraged if not completely prohibited.

As outlined above, the 11% cut in capitation funding to schools in recent years has had a huge impact. Unfortunately, many schools are in the position where they rely on the generosity of parents to keep the school running and pay basic bills such as heating and electricity. However, it is not acceptable that parents should be forced into meeting this shortfall in funding, particularly when so many are struggling to meet their own household bills.

Sinn Féin has published the Education (Regulation of Voluntary Contributions Bill) 2017 in an attempt to address this issue. This bill seeks to give the Minister power to regulate the area of voluntary contributions and eventually prohibit schools from seeking voluntary contributions once the level of funding to schools is restored to an acceptable level.

Sinn Féin proposes:

- The Government regulate the practice of seeking voluntary contributions and ensure that no child is treated unfavourably as a result of the fact that his/her parent did not make a voluntary contribution
- Capitation funding to schools be increased by €35 million over the next five years to restore the rates to pre-recession levels
- Additional funding of €20 million be made available to schools for the purposes of additional classroom resources such as photocopying, art supplies and other equipment
- Schools be required to record voluntary contributions in annual accounts and these be made available for inspection by parents

School Meals and School Transport | Béile scoile agus taistil scoile

According to the survey of the Irish League of Credit Unions, the average spend on school lunches equates to €154 per child. The annual funding for the school meals programme is €47.5 million and is operated in 1640 schools across the state with almost 200,000 pupils participating in the scheme. With over 910,000 pupils enrolled at primary and second level in 3961 schools across the state, it is clear that access to the school meals programme is by no means widespread or universal.

To date the emphasis of the school meals programme has been on the operation of breakfast clubs with funding extended in recent years to school lunch programmes. In many participating schools the allocation extends to 90% of the funding required for school lunches, with the money running out before the end of term. Between 2009 and 2016, non DEIS schools could not access the school meals programme and 2017 will mark the first year that these schools can access the scheme.

The current fees for school transport are €100 for a primary school child (up to a maximum of €220 per family) and €350 for a secondary school student (up to a maximum of €650 per family). School Transport is provided free of charge to students on medical cards, providing they are travelling to their nearest school.

Following a value for money review of the scheme, rules were put in place that children travelling to their nearest school only are eligible for school transport. Students wishing to attend a school other than their nearest school must do so on a concessionary basis. In practice, up to 20% of all pupils travel on a concessionary basis due to the fact that many parents choose to send their children to the school traditionally associated with their community, which their friends and siblings may attend. According to the review of the concessionary charges and rules element of the School Transport Scheme carried out by the Department of Education, it is estimated that up to 10,000 medical card holders may currently be paying for school transport.

Sinn Féin proposes:

- Doubling the funding to the school meals programme over the next five years in order to increase access to the scheme.
- Prioritising the provision of lunches and breakfasts to all DEIS pupils and allocating the full funding required to provide this for the full school term.
- The Department should carry out a full review of the operation of the value for money recommendations of the school transport scheme from a child rights perspective.
- The Department should prioritise free school transport for all children on medical cards, including those on concessionary transport, where the child is travelling on concessionary transport to a school with pre-established community or social links.
- Increase funding to the school transport scheme by €30 million over the next five years with a view to making the service more flexible and affordable for parents.

Conclusion | Conclúid

The policies pursued by successive governments have failed our children and parents are at the end of their tether each year in battling excessive back to school costs. For lower income families, these costs are a real burden and threaten the ability of disadvantaged children to participate in education.

Sinn Féin believes with investment and political will, we can remove the prohibitive costs barriers to education and ensure that all children, irrespective of their background can access education on an equal footing.

In order for this Government to fulfil its obligations under the constitution and the Education Act, it must intervene to ensure a comprehensive policy response that delivers results for parents and children. Piecemeal proposals and shifting the responsibility to schools will not address this issue.

We believe that the proposals set out above have the ability to transform our education system into one truly fit for a republic, where the right of a child to access an education is not subject to the ability of its parents to pay.

Appendix Costs | Costas

PROPOSAL TAIRISCINT	COSTS COSTAS
Restore Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to 2011 levels	€25 million (need official cost – submitted to DEPER)
Increase School Books Funding	€45 million to increase funding to €60 million based on current state spend of €16 million ¹
Increase Capitation to schools	€40 million ²
Additional Funding for Classroom resources	€20 million ³
Double funding to school meals programme	€47.5 million ⁴
Increase funding to school transport scheme	€30 million ⁵

(FOOTNOTES)

¹ PQ reference 33744/17

² PQ references 12175/16 and PQ reference 12176/16 based on 11% increase

³ Standard Allocation

⁴ PQ reference 17766/17

⁵ See page 12 of the Review of the Concessionary Charges and Rules Element of the School Transport Scheme



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