



SINN FéIN DOCUMENT:

LET'S END BACK TO SCHOOL STRESS



Donnchadh
Ó Laoghaire TD

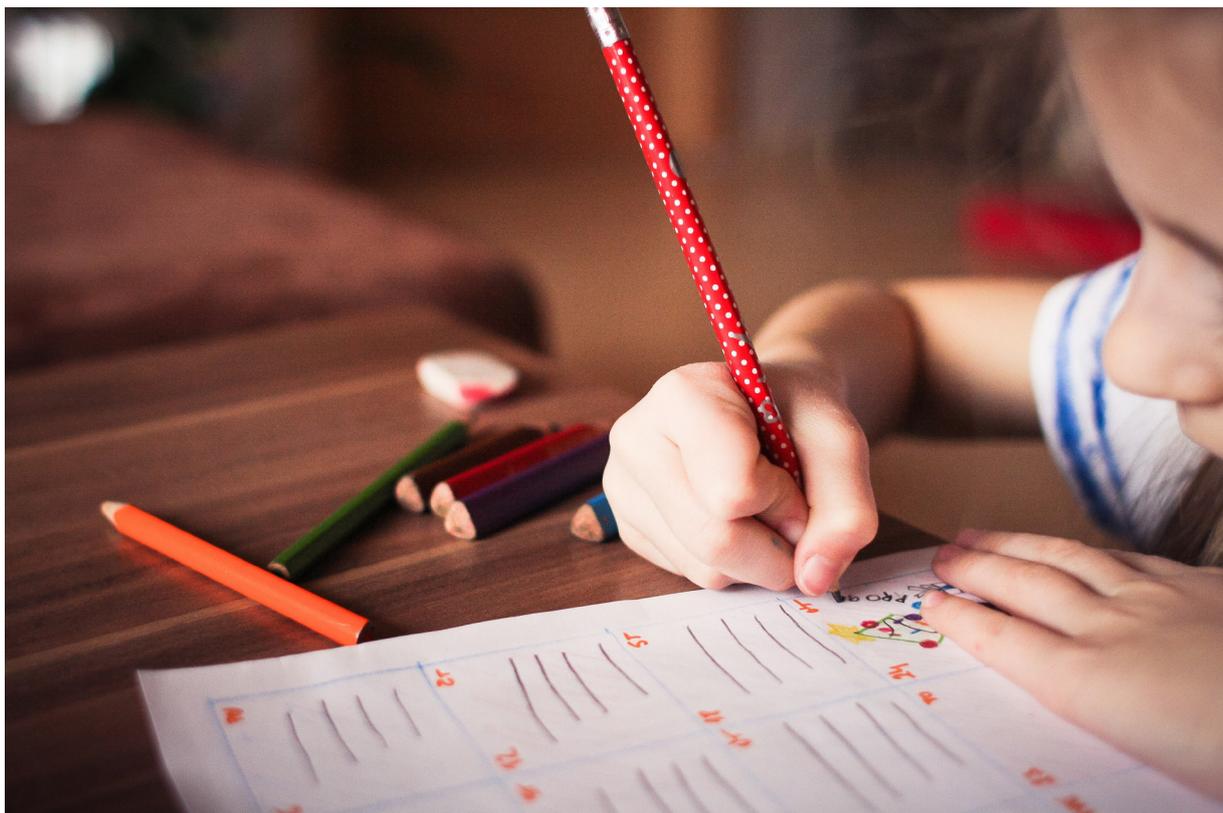
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Contents

Introduction Réamhrá	3
Recommendations Moltaí	4
Free Education Matters – Tá tabhacht le Oideachas Saor in aisce	5
School Uniforms Éide Scoile	7
School Books Leabhair scoile	9
Voluntary Contributions Dréacht Dheonach	11
School Meals and School Transport Béile scoile agus taistil scoile	13
Conclusion Conclúid	15





Introduction | Réamhrá

Every year, every summer, parents are put to the pin of their collar trying to organise uniforms, shoes, books, so-called 'voluntary contributions' and much more.

More than any other time of year it becomes abundantly clear that free Primary and Secondary Education in this state is a myth.

Far from a relaxed time, summer can cause huge stress to thousands upon thousands of families across the country.

According to a survey carried out by the Irish League of Credit Unions, published in July 2019, 78% of parents were struggling financially with Back to School costs (up on 68% the previous year).

Parents have to fork out on average €949 to get their children ready for primary school and €1,399 to send them to secondary school.

Over a third (36%) of families fall into debt over this period including 24% who go to moneylenders through sheer desperation and despite charging interest rates that are through the roof, putting families under even more financial pressure.

Two thirds of parents have to decide that a child does not participate in some extracurricular activities so that they can cover costs and a third of them won't be able to afford school trips.

For all the rhetoric of the Government they are letting down many hard-working families, by failing to get to grips with the soaring costs of sending children back to school.

This is part of the growing cost of living crisis in this state, and of underfunded public services requiring citizens to cough up more.

Education has long been a key priority area for Sinn Féin and in Government in the North we have always worked to ensure equal access to education regardless of income.

In the South we have consistently put forward budget packages to alleviate the burden placed on families by back to school costs and will be pushing in the upcoming budget for measures to get to grips with ever-increasing back to education costs.

In Government Sinn Féin will ensure that the summer months and the Back to School period does not mean parents coming under stress or having to go without.

Key Recommendations | **Moltaí**

- ✓ A €140 Back to School Bonus for every child paid at the start of July
- ✓ Legislative measures to ensure schools make uniforms affordable, and give power to the Ombudsman for Children to investigate and make recommendations
- ✓ Deliver a scheme which makes school books free for all children, rolled out over a number of budgets
- ✓ In the interim, the Department of Education should carry out an annual survey of school book rental schemes in the school census and issue guidelines to schools on the use of workbooks
- ✓ End School reliance on so-called voluntary contributions by increasing core capitation funding to schools and legislate to end the contributions
- ✓ Significantly expand School Meals Programme and initiate a Pilot 'Holiday Hunger' Scheme
- ✓ Reform and increase funding for the school transport scheme so that it is more flexible and affordable for parents





Free Education Matters | Tá tabhacht le Oideachas Saor in aisce

Helping all families with Back to School costs

This September approximately 765,000 children will attend Primary and Secondary School, a fifth of the state's population, and the future of our society.

Primary and Secondary Education are in theory meant to be free. They are a fundamental right under both Irish and International Law.

No child should miss out on the opportunity to have a quality education because of the income of their parents or guardians.

But the reality is that education is not free - research from Zurich Life Assurance, 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.

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.

The recession and the 11% cuts inflicted on Capitation Grants by Fianna Fáil, Green, Fine Gael, and Labour Governments had a huge impact on this, forcing schools to scale up fundraising and so-called 'voluntary contributions'. It is absurd that schools are not fully funded for basics such as heat and light, and maintenance.

Likewise the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is still well below what it was in 2011, €50 below the rate of €200 for Primary School and €30 below the rate of €305 for Secondary School.

Many families receive no support or assistance whatsoever given how strict the requirements are and how low the income threshold is. Of the parents who had applied for the Back to School Allowance in 2018 just 58% were successful in their application

In 2018 154,000 children attending Primary School were eligible for the payment but 409,459 were not and 112,000 children attending secondary school were eligible for the payment, but 245,408 who were not.

Sinn Féin is proposing a €140 Back to School Bonus should be introduced and paid for every child so that every family gets help with the crippling cost of back to school.

This would be a double payment of Child Benefit which would be paid to every family for each child at the start of July.

This annual bonus payment would equate to increasing child benefit by €12 per month or 8.5%, reversing some of the major cuts inflicted on Child Benefit by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and the Greens.

School Uniforms | Éide Scoile

According to the Barnardos School Costs Survey in 2018, the average uniform cost in primary school is €110 and the average cost of footwear is €45, while for secondary the average uniforms costs were €200 and the average cost of footwear was €75.

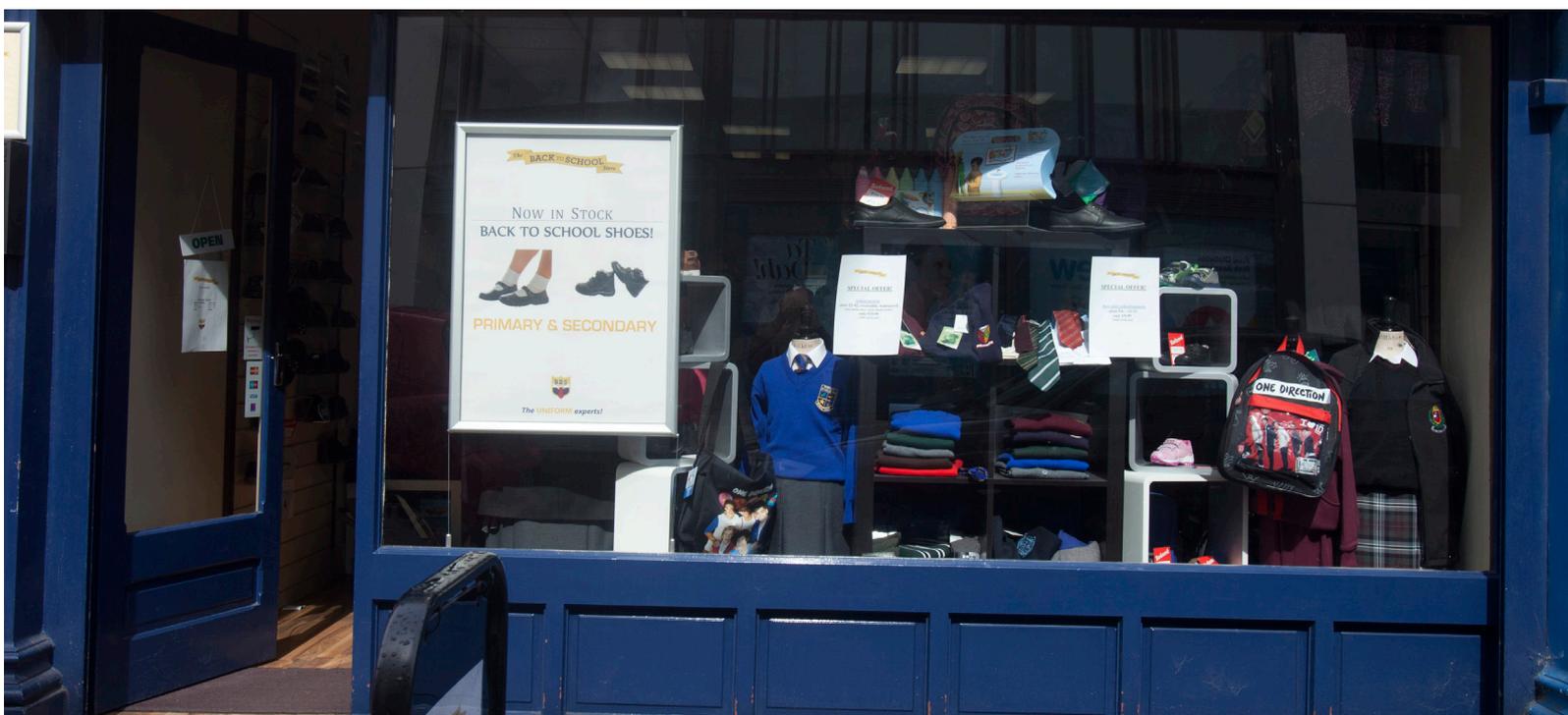
Most children (75% of primary and 97% of secondary children) have to be dressed in a standard school uniform to attend school and in the majority of cases these are crested, non-generic items. Many schools rely on suppliers that have a monopoly on the item of clothing, and very often where the prices of these items increase, the parents have no option except to pay the increased price.

This places a huge strain on many families and it is unreasonable given how easy it would be for schools to incorporate generic non branded items in to a uniform.

In 2013, the Department of Education and Skills issued a direction to schools to consult with parents on the issue of school uniforms. However a survey by Barnardos indicates that almost half of parents did not receive the survey.

The Board of Management have the greatest power in this area currently, and the circular issued by the Minister for Education to the Boards in 2017 regarding generic uniforms did not place an onus on schools to implement the measures it contained. Nor was there any mechanism to monitor or ensure compliance.

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.

As one of the biggest costs facing families in advance of the school year much more robust action is required by the government to reduce the cost of sending children back to school.

Sinn Féin Proposes:

- ✓ **The principle of ensuring school uniforms are affordable should be established on a statutory footing like the School Admissions Code in England**
- ✓ **All schools should be legally required, under the Education Acts, to produce a dress code or school uniform policy This would naturally also allow for schools to have a policy of not requiring uniforms at all**
- ✓ **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 which should include an obligation to provide the option of generic school uniforms and that these obligations be monitored by the Department**
- ✓ **Ombudsman for Children should have power to investigate and make recommendations in relation to complaints on the failure of schools to comply with the requirement to reduce school uniform costs**



School Books | Leabhair scoile

According to Barnardos, the average cost of school books per child ranges from €95 for a primary school pupil to €220 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.

While there are School Book Rental Schemes there are still 26% of pupils in primary school who do not have access to such schemes and 60% of pupils in secondary schools. Furthermore, 61% of parents at primary level and 68% at secondary level reported that they only include textbooks. Workbooks and other materials are not included. A family with three children would have to buy the same workbook three times over.

The cost of textbooks remains very high and, despite the book rental schemes, it is a significant addition to bills for many families due to workbooks and regular



revisions of texts. The data available to the Department is inadequate.

The costs related to technology are also incrementally becoming a factor as 15% of parents reported being required to have a tablet or laptop and 25% in secondary School. While at Primary School it is generally the school that bears the cost, in secondary school 81% said they had to help fund devices with 77% also having to pay for software and apps. Laptops and tablets are expensive. The average cost paid by parents this year was in the region of €700.

Sinn Féin proposes:

- The policy objective has to be a scheme where books are provided free of charge through the schools, funded by the Department of Education. This to be done through continued increases in funding for the School Book Schemes, with an aim to achieve entirely free books. This would be in line with the recommendation of the recent Joint Oireachtas Report on School costs**
- In the intervening period 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**
- Guidelines should also be developed on Schools bearing the costs of any technology required**



‘Voluntary Contributions’ | An ‘Dréacht Dheonach’

The prevalence of and reliance on so-called voluntary contributions has grown and grown in recent years and it is a natural outworking of schools being underfunded. It is as simple as that.

According to a survey undertaken by the Catholic Primary School Management Association the contribution of parents to the running of primary schools is €40m per annum. Schools are also increasingly forced to fundraise for simple things such as heat, light and stationary.

While in theory these contributions are voluntary, in practice they are often anything but. In primary school, according to Barnardos, 67% of parents have been asked for a voluntary contribution, up 11% on last year. In secondary school, 71% of parents have been asked to pay a contribution, an increase of 2% since last year. The average cost at primary level is €85 and in secondary it is €225.

This, however, is a number that varies greatly and often the voluntary contribution sought by the school is much greater.

In the vast majority of cases (74%) schools pursue parents who don't pay the contribution with reminders sent by email, text or letters with some schools even sending reminders of requests for payment home with children. There is a significant expectation placed on parents to pay and in some instances there have





been penalties for children whose parents haven't paid such as not having access to lockers or being singled out in class.

This, it should be stated, is in addition to the expectation that parents contribute towards fundraising throughout the year.

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.

The 11% cut in capitation funding to schools in recent years has had a huge impact. On average, schools get state funding of around €46,000 a year for operating costs - however average bills total €91,000.

Unfortunately this means that 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.

Sinn Féin proposes:

- The government should work towards the goal of eliminating entirely so-called voluntary contributions**
- This to be done by eliminating the funding shortfall with capitation funding to schools increased**
- Additional funding be made available to schools for the purposes of additional classroom resources such as photocopying, art supplies and other equipment**
- The Government immediately legislate to ensure that no child is treated unfavourably because of the fact that his/ her parent did not make a voluntary contribution**



School Meals and School Transport | Béile scoile agus taistil scoile

Hunger has often been cited as a major roadblock in a child's learning. Children who are unable, for whatever reason, to access consistent, quality meals often struggle to keep up with their peers and lack the concentration levels of their classmates.

The school meals programme aims to provide a nutritional meal to children at least once a day in the hope of ensuring that, with at least one guaranteed and healthy meal every single day, their success in education will be greatly improved.

The scheme is aimed at schools catering to children with additional educational needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Funding is allocated on a school year basis and must be applied for every year. Priority is given to DEIS entitled schools however there is no guarantee of funding and schools must be able to prove both the requirement for and correct implementation of the scheme.

"Holiday Hunger" as it is often dubbed however poses a threat to many children. With the School Meals Programme running only on a school yearly basis, parents without the means to do so must find a way to provide lunches (and in some cases breakfast and dinner), normally given by the school, to their children during the summer holidays.

Pauline Brown, Regional Manager for SVP, explains: "With so many young people guaranteed a balanced, healthy meal at lunchtime each day through free school meals during term time, it can often be the case that during school holidays, these children's families just don't have enough resources to feed the entire family."

The summer months should be a time of fun and enjoyment for children. They should be given the break from intensive education they deserve and have earned and have ample time and opportunity to experience the freedom and play so vital to their development. Instead, faced with hunger and worry about where their next meal will come from, many children may dread the summer months.

Transport

The current fees for school transport are €100 for a primary schoolchild (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, provided 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 in order to increase access to the scheme**
- ✓ **The introduction of a pilot scheme to combat “Holiday Hunger” and continue a programme similar to School Meals throughout the summer months with the hope of rolling this out nationwide**
- ✓ **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**
- ✓ **A full review of the operation of the value for money recommendations of the school transport scheme from a child rights perspective**
- ✓ **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 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 battling excessive back to school costs.

All families are subsidising their Primary and Secondary Schools, not through the fault of those schools, but because of underfunding by Government. For lower income families, these costs are a real burden and threaten the ability of disadvantaged children to participate in education.

It is a similar pattern throughout our public services where the public must make additional contributions beyond what they have paid in taxes. Sinn Féin believes in fair taxation accompanied by quality services that are properly funded.

We believe in free education – properly free education.

With strong legislative action and the adequate funding of the education system we can give parents a break and ensure that all children, irrespective of their background can access education on an equal footing.

We believe that the proposals set out in this document have the ability to transform our education system into one which is truly befitting of a republic that cherishes all its children equally.



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