



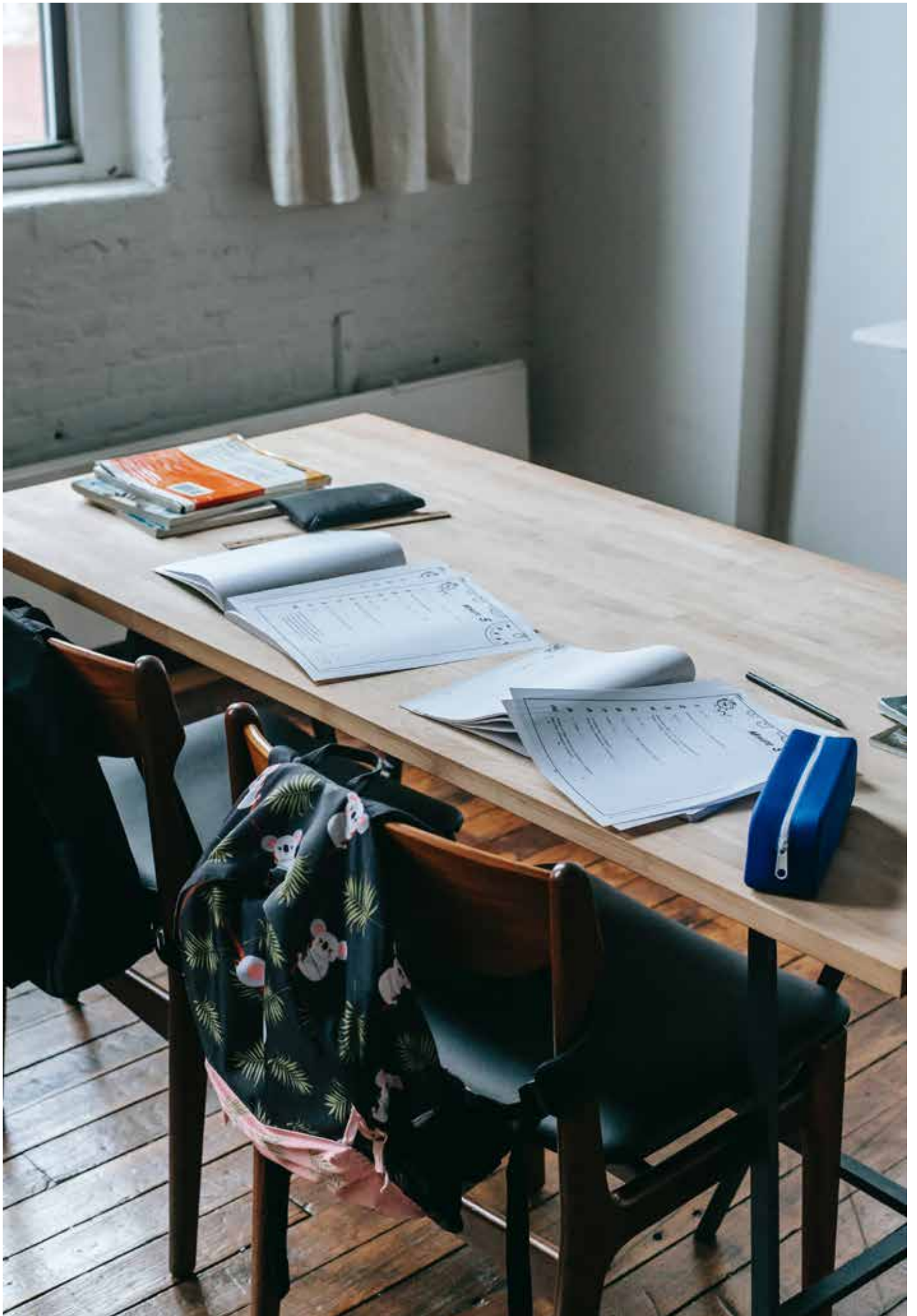
Let's Tackle Back to School Costs



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The Constitution enshrines a right to free primary education for all children in Ireland. This fundamental right recognises the importance of education, as a means of improving life outcomes for children and as a way out of poverty for some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Despite this fundamental constitutional protection, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that ‘free education’ in Ireland is a myth. In reality, the hidden costs and fees associated with sending children to school each year place a crippling financial burden on parents.

Ireland’s education system is heavily subsidised by families. Many parents are forced into debt in order to give their child equal access to education, through meeting the costs of voluntary contributions, uniforms, books and school transport.

A survey undertaken by the Irish League of Credit Unions in July 2021 noted that two thirds (63%) of parents found covering the cost of back to school a significant financial burden, with just under a quarter (24%) of families in debt over back to school costs and 21% of families having debts of over €500.

Parents make every effort to cover these costs, often at the expense of their own personal needs.

The current Back to School Allowance, €150 per primary pupil and €275 per secondary pupil, is inadequate to meet the realities of the back to school costs for many low-income families, who often must meet these costs at the expense of other essentials such as food and bills.

Since 2008, the primary source of funding to cover the running costs of schools, the capitation grant, has been cut by successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments. This means that many primary and secondary schools struggle to pay for essential services such as heat and light, and parents have been increasingly burdened with making up the shortfall through voluntary contributions and fundraising.

The pandemic has shone a light on the underfunding of our education system. Now is the time to tackle the high costs of education on families, and to ensure that the right to ‘free’ education is put into practice.

Key Recommendations:

1. Work towards a fully free school book scheme for all children, through increases in funding for the School Book Scheme over a number of budgets.
2. Establish a dedicated ICT Assistance Fund of €5m which families can apply directly to for means-tested support.
3. Enact legislative measures to make school uniforms affordable.
4. Alleviate financial burden on parents by ending reliance on voluntary contributions through increased capitation of €200 per primary pupil and €330 per secondary pupil.
5. Significantly enhance the School Meals Programme, ensuring all children in DEIS primary schools receive a hot meal during the school day.
6. Eliminate fees on the school transport scheme at primary and post-primary level, beginning with a 20% reduction in Budget 2022.

SCHOOL BOOKS

The cost of books remains the most expensive item for parents when children are returning to school. According to a Barnardos survey released in July 2021, the average cost of school books for parents is €101 per primary school child and €201 per child at secondary level. Just over half (52%) of parents said the cost of their child's books had increased since last year.

Due to inconsistencies in the availability of book rental schemes across schools, there is huge variation in the price parents pay across all age groups.

Figures released to Sinn Féin show that only 68% of secondary schools operate some form of book rental scheme, compared to over 95% of primary schools. Given that secondary school books are significantly more expensive, the lack of widespread operation of these rental schemes is concerning.

Without a book rental scheme, children may be at risk of becoming disengaged with education as they are unable to interact with their learning to the same level as their classmates. It is clear that further guidance and funding is needed from the Department, including updated guidelines for secondary schools on how to successfully run the scheme.

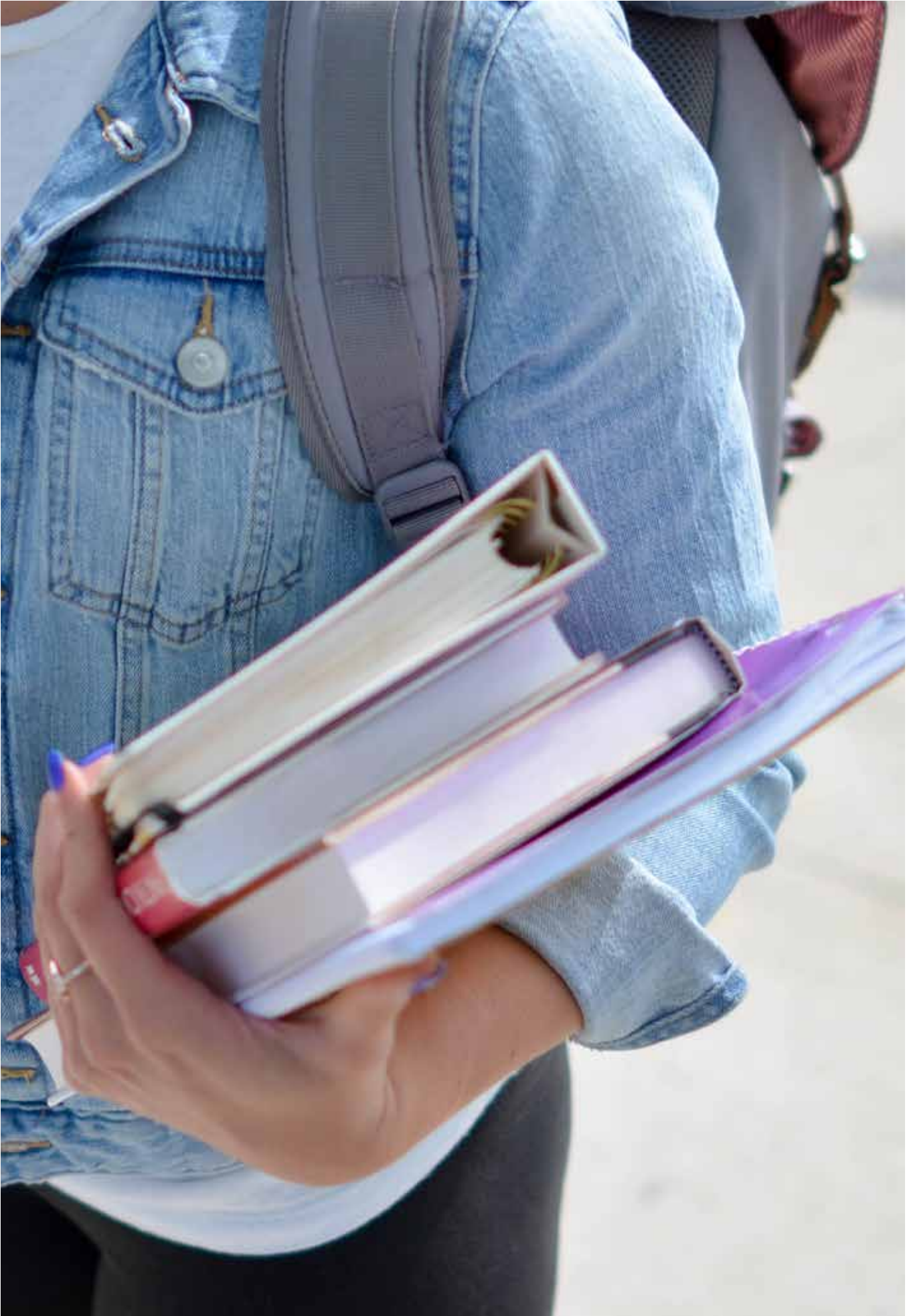
Another issue affecting many families is the ongoing release of new edition books, and the prominence of single-use workbooks. Aside from the environmental issues of single-use workbooks, these practices lead to many families being unable to reuse older siblings' books, adding to the increasing costs of parents each year.

It was welcome that the Programme for Government last summer gave a commitment to delivering free school books. However, this does not have a timeline or costs, and the Minister has shown very little political will to advance this issue as a priority.

Sinn Féin has long argued that school books must be provided free of charge, as is the case in the 6 counties and many other jurisdictions. The expansion of the school book rental scheme is the vehicle for achieving this, and we believe it would cost €40m to deliver this scheme to every child at primary and post-primary.

Sinn Féin would:

- Work towards a fully free school book scheme for all children, through increases in funding for the School Book Scheme over a number of budgets.
- In the interim, commission a survey of school book rental schemes across the state, so that data on the operation and scale of the schemes can be used to achieve more consistency across all schools.
- Direct the Department to review the arrangements with educational publishers, particularly in relation to the voluntary code of practice and the promise to provide textbooks at a discount to schools.
- Issue clear guidelines to schools, particularly at secondary level, on the running of the school book scheme to encourage more schools to take part.
- Issue guidance to schools discouraging the use of single-use workbooks, and the circumstances in which schools may consider changing textbooks, with a view to reducing any change where possible to create savings for parents.



BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Crippling costs of purchasing iPads and other devices, as well as broadband connection, are becoming continually more prominent in every family's list of back to school costs.

It became very apparent during the pandemic that the Government's ICT grant, inadequate at the best of times, was totally insufficient to ensure that every child could take part in online learning whilst school buildings were closed. Barnardos reported that 23% of parents did not have access to the technology their children required to learn at home.

Recent reports show that some 4,500 children did not return to school when it reopened following Covid closures last year. There is no doubt that contained within these numbers are vulnerable students who may have become disengaged through limited access to devices. Indeed, teachers who reported a lack of dedicated school ICT infrastructure were more likely to report low engagement from pupils.

The Department of Education's ICT funding over the last year was welcomed but is not nearly enough to tackle the digital divide. The pressure on families to purchase iPads, particular at secondary level, is becoming more and more profound.

Investment in ICT for students was inadequate at the best of times and needs significant investment now.

Sinn Féin would:

- Establish a dedicated ICT assistance fund with €5m which families can apply directly to for means-tested support.
- Undertake a consultation process with teachers, parents, students and all relevant parties to establish a best practice model for the future use of technology in education.





SCHOOL UNIFORMS

According to research by Barnardos, last year parents on average spent approximately €116 on uniforms for primary students and €184 for students in secondary education, with over 55% of parents indicating that the costs had increased from the year previous.

The research shows that crested or branded uniforms are the most common, with 75% of primary parents and 91% of post-primary parents surveyed having to buy a crested uniform or tracksuit for their child.

The Minister for Education has previously sent circulars to all schools requesting that schools make generic uniforms available, but there is currently no onus on schools to implement this, meanwhile 44% of parents say they feel pressured into buying branded goods for their children.

The previous Government published the Parent and Student Charter Bill. The Bill makes some progress by placing a statutory obligation on schools to consult students and parents in relation to school costs. Again, however, school uniforms are not specifically mentioned in the Bill, nor is there any obligation to introduce non-branded, generic elements of uniforms, or to reduce school uniform costs.

In England, the Schools Admissions Code 2012 places a statutory requirement on schools to limit the expense of uniforms, through obliging schools to ensure that uniforms are available from multiple sources. A similar code in Ireland could tackle the soaring costs of uniforms for families.

Sinn Féin would:

- Submit amendments to the Parent and Student Charter Bill to ensure schools are legally obliged to consult with parents when determining school uniform policy.
- Amend the Education Act 1998 to give the Minister the power to produce statutory guidelines on the development of school uniform policy, including the use of generic rather than branded items.
- Put the obligation on schools to ensure school uniforms are affordable and available from multiple sources on a statutory footing, similar to the Schools Admissions Code in England.
- Extend powers to the Ombudsman for Children to investigate and make recommendations on how schools are fulfilling their obligations to reduce school uniform costs.

VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS

The practice of schools seeking voluntary contributions has become widespread in recent years. Barnardos report that 68% of primary parents and 78% of parents with children in secondary school are requested to pay a voluntary contribution. These contributions can range between €50 and €300.

Voluntary contributions can add significant pressure on parents as schools mainly seek the payment in September which, on top of all the other expenses, can tip many parents to breaking point, especially those who have more than one child of school age.

In reality, this contribution is voluntary in name only. The same report by Barnardos states that the majority of schools pursue parents who do not pay the voluntary contribution.

Many parents have reported feeling disengaged from their child's school and teachers as they can't afford to pay the increasing costs of these contributions. They also express fear that, as reminders of non-payment are often sent home through their children, they will be stigmatised in front of their classmates.

It is extremely concerning, that parents are having to fundraise to keep the lights on in their children's schools. Barnardos report that 61% of primary parents and 57% of secondary parents currently pay classroom resource fees such as photocopying, art supplies and stationery.

The Government provided additional funding to schools this year in the context of the pandemic, to meet essential costs for PPE and other measures. The Minister has pointed to this often, as if a sticking plaster for years of repeated cuts to capitation.

However, this additional funding covered only the baseline of what was needed to address the additional Covid-related costs. It was not a magic wand to reverse the largescale funding issues schools have been facing for over a decade, nor will it bring an end to extortionate voluntary contributions.

Some Covid-related measures will still be necessary in our schools come September, such as air monitors for classrooms, and the Government must continue to provide the funding required to ensure schools can reopen safely after the summer.

However, additional Covid-related funding alone will not be enough. Sinn Féin have repeatedly called for the capitation grant to be significantly increased, reducing the need for schools to rely on voluntary contributions from parents.

Sinn Féin would:

- Increase the capitation levels to €200 per primary pupil and €330 per secondary pupil, at a cost of €9.4m and €5.3m respectively.
- Submit amendments to the Parent and Student Charter Bill to regulate the practice of seeking voluntary contributions, ensuring that no student will be singled out because of their parent not making a voluntary contribution.





SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Sinn Féin have long argued for the delivery of free school transport for every child. It has obvious benefits: aside from the lower costs for families, there are enormous environmental and traffic-reducing benefits. It is extremely disappointing that the Government don't share this objective.

Last year 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, relied on the School Transport Scheme.

The current fees for school transport are €100 for a child at primary school (up to a max €220 per family) and €350 for a secondary school student (up to a max €650 per family).

Each year, thousands of children are left without seats on their school buses. This is particularly acute in rural communities, as cycling or walking to school isn't an option. Last summer, a 50% capacity rule was put in place to ensure social distancing and safer transport of children. However, the Government failed to increase the bus fleet sufficiently, at the cost of some children losing their seat on the school bus.

In budget 2022, Sinn Féin would like to see increased investment in the school transport scheme by €17m which could deliver approximately 17,000 additional seats and would task the Department with planning for the delivery of these additional seats in advance of September 2022.

Sinn Féin propose to eliminate the cost of school transport to families, removing this financial burden and putting hundreds of euro back in the pockets of families each year. We would begin this process, starting with a 20% reduction of fees in Budget 2022.

Sinn Féin would:

- Eliminate fees on the school transport scheme at primary and post-primary level. Beginning with a 20% reduction in Budget 2022
- Increase investment in the school transport scheme by €17m which could deliver approximately 17,000 additional seats and task the Department with planning for the delivery of these additional seats in advance of September 2022.
- Review the existing eligibility criteria for the School Transport Scheme, including the nearest school rule.

SCHOOL MEALS

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

The Government's School Meals Programme, whilst welcomed, is not doing enough to meet the needs of our children. Priority is given to DEIS schools, however there is no guarantee of funding each year. In many participating schools, the allocation of funding extends to only 90% of the funding required for school lunches, with the money often running out before the end of term.

The budget for school meals in this jurisdiction, at €10 per week per child, is considerably lower than British counterparts - £15 p/w in England, £19.50 p/w in Wales.

It is welcomed that 210,000 children were able to access the free school meals programme this year. However, in comparison to the nearly 1 million young people attending primary and secondary schools, it is apparent that the programme is not reaching every child who may need it. It is notable too that struggling households are dispersed within the population, and their children do not always attend DEIS schools where there can be additional support provided.

For the last two years, after significant pressure from opposition parties and other campaigning groups, the Government agreed to extend the school meals funding into the summer months. The school meals programme helps many families to sustain both a better school and work-life balance by easing pressure and ultimately assists families to reduce food bills on a daily or weekly basis.

Sinn Féin would:

- Work to ensure all children in DEIS primary schools receive a hot meal during the school day.
- Create a culture where canteens and food provision (at cost-price, subsidised or free through the school meals programme) within the school setting is the norm.





CONCLUSION

The piecemeal supports provided by successive governments have done little to ease the huge financial burden of parents tackling back to school costs.

Despite the constitutional protections of the right to education, in reality many children do not have equal educational opportunities due to a lack of resources. This is through no fault of their own, or of their parents, many of whom must ignore their own personal needs to provide for their children.

Sinn Féin believe in a truly free education – in securing a level playing field for all children by ensuring adequate funding in areas where it is most needed.

With strong legislative action, coupled with adequate direct exchequer funding, we can give parents a break and ensure that equal educational outcomes can be secured for all children, regardless of their parents' income status.

The proposals set out above, we believe, have the ability to begin transforming the educational system into one which ensures that the right to 'free' education is more than mere lip service, and which secures equal opportunities for all children on this island.



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