



**CUTTING
BACK TO SCHOOL
COSTS**
COSTAIS A
BHAINNEANN LE
FILLEADH
AR SCOIL A LAGHDÚ

Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire TD
SINN FÉIN SPOKESPERSON ON EDUCATION





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CUTTING BACK TO SCHOOL COSTS

COSTAIS A BHAINÉANN LE FILLEADH AR SCOIL A LAGHDÚ

Back to school costs are far too high and many families are under real financial pressure trying to cover the price of uniforms, books, voluntary contributions, lunches and transport costs. These costs are hitting families who are already struggling due to the cost of living crisis as day to day prices continue to rise, despite people's pay packets staying the same. No family should face the stress of being plunged into debt or struggling to get by just for sending a child to school. Families need a break from these spiralling costs.

It has become increasingly clear that 'free education' in Ireland is a myth. This must change. The government must act urgently to cut back to school costs and ensure education is genuinely free for families.

Far from a relaxed time, the summer can cause huge stress to thousands of parents as they do all they can to give their child equal access to education, through meeting the costs of voluntary contributions, books, uniforms, lunches and school transport.

This annual stress has been compounded for families by the cost of living crisis we are facing.

Families across the state are doing all they can to keep up with sky-high bills and runaway price increases, but

they still can't catch a break nor catch a breath. The Minister for Education has abandoned families who need urgent help.

The reality is, due to Government underfunding, our education system continues to be heavily subsidised by families. Each summer, there are many families forced into debt meeting this crippling financial burden.

A survey undertaken by the Irish league of Credit Unions last summer found that just under 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, 21% of families having debts of over €500.

The average cost of sending a child to primary school is now €1,186, and a whopping €1,491 for a secondary school child. We know that parents make every effort to cover these costs, often at the expense of their own personal needs. It shouldn't have to be this way.

Last summer, St Vincent de Paul reported experiencing a significant increase in calls from parents who were worried and anxious about meeting back to school costs, up 10% from the year before. In the context of the increasing cost of living, this number will only increase.

The Irish education system can no longer be propped up by already overstretched families. Now is the time to tackle the high cost of education on families, to bring an end to a summer of stress, and begin to make 'free education' a reality.

Sinn Féin is proposing a total additional investment of €161m in this package. We want to help families with school costs with cash supports, and increases to core expenditure which Sinn Féin would add to year on year until free school books and transport are delivered and voluntary contributions abolished.

A Sinn Féin government would stand up for families and ensure they get a break from the cost of living crisis by cutting back to school costs.

Key Recommendations:

1. **Extend Back to School Clothing & Footwear allowance to 500,000 additional children at existing rates of €160 from age 4-11 and €285 from age 12 up.**
2. **Increase the Back to School Clothing & Footwear Allowance by 50 percent for those who already qualify from €160 to €240 for children aged 4 to 11 and from €285 to €427.50 for those age 12 up.**
3. **Work towards abolishing Voluntary Contributions, by implementing the Education (Voluntary Contribution) Bill 2021 proposed by Sinn Féin and by increasing capitation funding to schools**
4. **Work towards a fully free schoolbook scheme for all children, through increases in funding to rapidly expand the availability of book rental schemes over a number of budgets.**
5. **Enact Sinn Féin's Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill without delay, to ensure all schools have a uniform policy that reduces costs for families.**
6. **Eliminate fees on the school transport scheme, beginning with a 20% reduction in 2023, and provide seats for an additional 10,000 children.**

Tá na costais a bhaineann le pilleadh ar scoil i bhfad ró-ard agus tá teaghlaigh faoi bhrú ceart airgeadais agus iad ag iarraidh praghas na n-éide, na leabhar, na ranníocaíochtaí deonacha, na lóna agus costais iompair a chlúdach. Tá na costais seo ag dul i bhfeidhm ar theaghlaigh atá ag streachailt cheana féin mar gheall ar an ngéarchéim chostais mhaireachtála de réir mar a leanann praghsanna ó lá go lá ag ardú, in ainneoin tuarastal daoine a bheith ag

fanacht mar a chéile. Níor cheart go mbeadh teaghlach ar bith faoi bhrú agus iad ag dul i bhfiacha nó ag streachailt chun leanbh a chur ar scoil. Teastaíonn sos ó theaghlaigh ó na costais seo atá ag dul in airde.

Tá sé ag éirí níos soiléire gur breág atá sa choincheap go bhfuil 'oideachas saor' in Éirinn. Ní mór dó seo athrú. Caithfidh an rialtas gníomhú go práinneach chun gearradh siar ar chostais scoile agus chun a chinntiú go bhfuil oideachas atá saor in aisce i ndáiríre do theaghlaigh.

Seachas a bheith ina thréimhse shuaimhneach, is féidir leis an samhradh strus ollmhór a chur ar na mílte tuismitheoirí agus iad ag déanamh ar féidir leo chun rochtain chothrom a thabhairt dá leanbh ar oideachas, trí chostais ranníocaíochtaí deonacha, leabhar, éidí, lóna agus iompar scoile a íoc.

Tá an strus bliantúil seo níos measa do theaghlaigh mar gheall ar an ngéarchéim chostais mhaireachtála atá romhainn.

Tá teaghlaigh ar fud an stáit ag déanamh a ndícheall chun coimeád suas le billí atá an-ard go deo agus arduithe praghais, ach go fóill beag ní féidir leo sos a ghlacadh ná faoiseamh a fháil. Tá teaghlaigh a bhfuil cúnaimh práinneach ag teastáil uathu tréigthe ag an Aire Oideachais.

Is í lomchnámh na fírinne, mar gheall ar ghanmhaoiniú an Rialtais, go bhfuil teaghlaigh ag íoc as cuid den chóras oideachais. Gach samhradh, bíonn ar go leor teaghlach dul i bhfiacha chun an t-ualach ollmhór seo a iompar.

Fuarthas amach i suirbhé a rinne Conradh na hÉireann de Chomhair Chreidmheasa an samhradh seo caite go raibh beagán faoi bhun dhá thrian (63%) de na tuismitheoirí den tuairim gur ualach suntasach airgeadais é costas filleadh ar scoil, agus beagán faoi bhun an ceathrú cuid (24%) de na teaghlaigh i bhfiacha mar gheall ar na costais a bhaineann le pilleadh ar scoil, bhí fiacha os cionn €500 ag 21% de theaghlaigh.

Is é an meánchostas a bhaineann le páiste a chur ar an mbunscoil anois ná €1,186, agus €1,491 do pháiste meán-scoile. Tá a fhios againn go ndéanann tuismitheoirí gach iar-racht na costais seo a chlúdach, go minic ar chostas a gcuid riachtanas pearsanta féin. Níor cheart go gcaithfeadh sé a bheith mar seo.

An samhradh seo caite, thuairiscigh Naomh Uinseann de Pól go raibh méadú suntasach tagtha ar ghlaonna ó tuismitheoirí a bhí buartha agus imníoch faoi chostais a bhaineann le pilleadh ar scoil, méadú 10% ón mbliain roimhe. I gcomhthéacs an chostais mhaireachtála atá ag méadú, ní bheidh an líon seo ach ag méadú.

Ní féidir le teaghlaigh a bhfuil an iomarca brú orthu cheana íoc as córas oideachais na hÉireann a thuilleadh. Anois an t-am le dul i ngleic le hardchostas an oideachais ar theagh-

laigh, deireadh a chur le samhradh an-strusmhar, agus tús a chur le 'saoroideachas' a chur ar fáil mar is ceart.

Tá infheistíocht iomlán breise de €161m á moladh ag Sinn Féin sa phacáiste seo. Ba mhaith linn cabhrú le teaghlach le costais scoile le tacaíochtaí airgid, agus méaduithe ar an mbunchaiteachas a chuirfeadh Sinn Féin leis bliain i ndiaidh bliana go dtí go seachadtar leabhair scoile agus iompar chun na scoile saor in aisce agus go gcuirfí deireadh le ranníocaíochtaí deonacha.

Dhéanfadh rialtas Shinn Féin an fód a sheasamh ar son na dteaghlach agus a chinntiú go bhfaigheadh siad sos ón ngéarchéim chostais mhaireachtála trí ghearradh siar ar chostais scoile.

Príomh-Mholtaí:

1. Liúntas Éadaí & Bróga don Scoilbhliain Nua a thabhairt go 500,000 páiste breise ag rátaí reatha de €160 ó aois 4-11 agus €285 ó aois 12 suas.
2. An Liúntas Éadaí & Bróga chun Pilleadh ar Scoil a mhéadú 50 faoin gcéad dóibh siúd atá cáilithe

cheana féin ó €160 go €240 do pháistí idir 4 agus 11 bliana d'aois agus ó €285 go €427.50 dóibh siúd atá 12 bliana d'aois suas.

3. Oibriú i dtreo deireadh a chur le Ranníocaíochtaí Deonacha, tríd an mBille Oideachais (Ranníocaíocht Dheonach) 2021 atá molta ag Sinn Féin a chur i bhfeidhm agus trí mhaoiniú caipitíochta do scoileanna a mhéadú.
4. Oibriú i dtreo scéim leabhar scoile atá in aisce go hiomlán do gach leanbh, trí mhéaduithe ar mhaoiniú chun infhaighteacht scéimeanna leabhar ar cíós a mhéadú go tapa thar roinnt buiséad.
5. Bille Oideachais Shinn Féin (Éidí Scoile Inacmhainne) a achtú gan mhoill, chun a chinntiú go bhfuil polasaí éide scoile ag gach scoil a laghdaíonn costais do theaghlach.
6. Táillí ar an scéim iompair scoile a dhíchur, ag tosú le laghdú 20% in 2023, agus suíocháin a chur ar fáil do 10,000 páiste breise.





BACK TO SCHOOL BONUS PAYMENT

ÍOCAÍOCHTAÍ BÓNAIS CHUN PILLEADH AR SCOIL

Back to school costs affect tens of thousands of families. As we know from years of surveys from Barnardos, the ICLU and the St Vincent De Paul, this has long been a huge cost for families – 63% finding covering back to school costs a significant burden.

This year, we are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis which is escalating rapidly. Many families are under more severe financial pressure than ever before.

It is for that reason, that Sinn Féin is proposing to significantly expand and enhance the Back to School Clothing & Footwear Allowance, to reach the parents of an additional 500,000 children. This would be at the existing payment rates of €160 and €285.

We would ensure that the majority of families are given some assistance with the enormous financial burden of Back to School.

We would also ensure that those who need assistance the most get it, with a targeted 50 percent increase to the payment rate from €160 to €240 for children aged 4 to 11 and from €285 to €427.50 for children from 12 up for currently qualifying households.

Last year 252,423 children were eligible for Back to School Clothing & Footwear Allowance. Under the Sinn Féin proposals, parents of almost three quarters of a million children would receive support with these costs, a vital assistance during this cost of living crisis.

There are tens of thousands of parents who must borrow to pay their back to school costs, who get no assistance. We want to give as many parents as possible assistance this year, particularly given the spiralling cost of living crisis.

SCHOOL TRANSPORT

IOMPAR CHUN NA SCOILE

Sinn Féin have long argued for the delivery of free school transport for every child. It has obvious environmental benefits, as well as lowering costs significantly for families.

Last year 121,400 children, including over 15,500 children with special educational needs, relied on the School Transport Scheme.

The current fees for the scheme are €100 for a child at primary school (up to a max of €220 per family) and €350 for a secondary school student (up to a max of €650 per family). This means that some families could be paying up to €870 per year in transport costs.

It is high time that this huge financial burden is removed. We must eliminate the costs of school transport to families, putting hundreds of euro back in families' pockets each year.

We also need to expand School Transport, to reduce costs for many more families, but also to reduce emis-

sions, traffic, and improve quality of life, which is why Sinn Féin is proposing 10,000 additional places on School Bus Transport.

Sinn Féin would:

- ✓ Eliminate fees on the school transport scheme, beginning with a 20% reduction in 2023
- ✓ We would add 10,000 additional places on School Transport.

Dhéanfadh Sinn Féin an méid seo a leanas:

- ✓ Chuirfí deireadh le táillí ar an scéim iompair scoile, ag tosú le laghdú 20% in 2023
- ✓ Chuirfimis 10,000 áit bhreise ar fáil ar Iompar Scoile.



VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS

RANNÍOCAÍOCHTAÍ DEONACHA

The prevalence and reliance on so-called 'voluntary' contributions has grown exponentially in the last number of years. Barnardos report that 68% of primary school parents and 78% of parents with children in secondary school are requested to pay a voluntary contribution. These contributions can range anywhere between €50 and €300.

We know that in reality, these contributions are 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.

One family contacted Sinn Féin last summer, whose child had been singled out and not given a school journal because they were not in a position to pay the full contribution requested. This is very wrong.

It is not just voluntary contributions that parents are expected to come up with over the summer months. Barnardos report that 61% of primary parents and 57% of secondary parents also pay classroom resource fees such as photocopying, art supplies and stationery.

It is alarming that parents are having to fundraise to keep the lights on in their children's schools. In the context of increasing energy costs and higher energy bills for schools, this financial pressure on families will only continue.

Last summer, Sinn Féin published the Education (Voluntary Contributions) Bill. This Bill would place an obligation on schools to make clear to families that contributions are voluntary. It would ensure that no child is stigmatised or denied opportunities because their parents are not in a position to make a contribution.

The Bill would prohibit schools from contacting parents more than once per school year looking for contributions, and work to end any stigma by disallowing reminders of these contributions to be sent home with their children.

It would ensure transparency, by placing an obligation on schools and the Department of Education to publish online the total amount collected in voluntary contributions and how this has been spent in each school. Crucially, the Bill sets out a pathway for bringing about an end to voluntary contributions for good while funding levels are adequately increased by Government.

This Bill has the potential to make a massive difference, by bringing an end to the pressure of voluntary contributions on families. However, when we brought the Bill to debate in the Dáil in March 2022, instead of supporting the swift passage of the Bill and taking the pressure off families, the Minister put forward an amendment to kick the can on the Bill and delay its passing by 9 months. This delay was supported by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party TDs.

Delaying action by 9 months will do nothing to help families who are struggling this summer. Government must take action to ensure schools have enough funding to sustain themselves without needing to be propped up by overstretched families.

Sinn Féin would:

- ✓ Increase capitation funding to €200 per primary pupil and €330 per secondary pupil, to ease the financial burden on parents to make up the shortfall through voluntary contributions.
- ✓ Enact Sinn Féin's Education (Voluntary Contributions) Bill without delay, paving the way to ending voluntary contributions for good.

Dhéanfadh Sinn Féin an méid seo a leanas:

- ✓ Maoiniú caipitíochta a mhéadú go €200 in aghaidh an dalta bunscoile agus €330 in aghaidh an dalta meánscoile, chun an t-ualach airgeadais ar thuismitheoirí a laghdú trí ranníocaíochtaí deonacha a chúiteamh.
- ✓ Bille Oideachais Shinn Féin (Ranníocaíochtaí Deonacha) a achtú gan mhoill, chun an bealach a réiteach le deireadh a chur le ranníocaíochtaí deonacha ar mhaithe.



SCHOOLBOOKS

LEABHAIR SCOILE

Schoolbooks are among the biggest parts of the back to school budget for parents. According to a Barnardos report, the average cost of schoolbooks for parents is €101 per child at primary school and €201 at secondary level. Just over half (52%) of parents surveyed said that the costs of their child's books had increased on the year previous.

It is a programme for government commitment to expand the free schoolbook scheme. Yet, 2 years into this Government's term, aside from a small pilot there is no progress towards free schoolbooks.

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. Book Rental schemes remain much more common in Primary school, despite the cost being greater at Secondary school, which must be addressed.

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.

Free schoolbooks have been available in the North since 1947. We are 75 years behind and counting.

Four generations of children and young people in the North have been given access to education that they may not have had otherwise, access that young people here have been and are still being denied because of Government inaction.

Sinn Féin has long argued that schoolbooks must be provided free of charge, as is the case in the North and

many other jurisdictions. The prompt expansion of the book rental scheme is the vehicle for achieving this.

Sinn Féin would:

- ✓ Work towards a fully free school book scheme for all children, through increases in funding to rapidly expand the availability of book rental schemes over a number of budgets.
- ✓ Expedite the review of current book rental schemes, to achieve consistency in the operation of the scheme across all schools.
- ✓ Review arrangements with educational publishers to ensure best value for money for families.
- ✓ Issue guidance to schools discouraging the use of single-use workbooks and frequent changes in textbooks used, to create savings for parents.

Dhéanfadh Sinn Féin an méid seo a leanas:

- ✓ D'oibreofaí i dtreo scéim leabhar scoile atá saor in aisce do gach páiste, trí mhéaduithe ar mhaoiniú chun infhaighteacht scéimeanna leabhar ar cíos a mhéadú go tapa thar roinnt buiséad.
- ✓ Chuirfí dlús leis an athbhreithniú ar scéimeanna cíosa leabhar reatha, chun comhsheasmhacht a bhaint amach in oibriú na scéime i ngach scoil.
- ✓ Dhéanfaí athbhreithniú ar shocruithe le foilsitheoirí oideachais chun an luach is fearr ar airgead a chinntiú do theaghlach.
- ✓ Chuirfí treoir amach do scoileanna ag moladh gan na leabhair oibre aonúsáide a úsáid agus gan na téacsleabhair a úsáidtear a athrú go minic, chun coigilteas a chruthú do thuismitheoirí.

SCHOOL UNIFORMS

ÉIDÍ SCOILE

According to Barnardos, parents on average spend approximately €116 on uniforms for primary students, and €184 for students at secondary level. Over 55% of parents surveyed indicated that uniform 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 parents with a child in secondary school having to buy a crested uniform or tracksuit for their child.

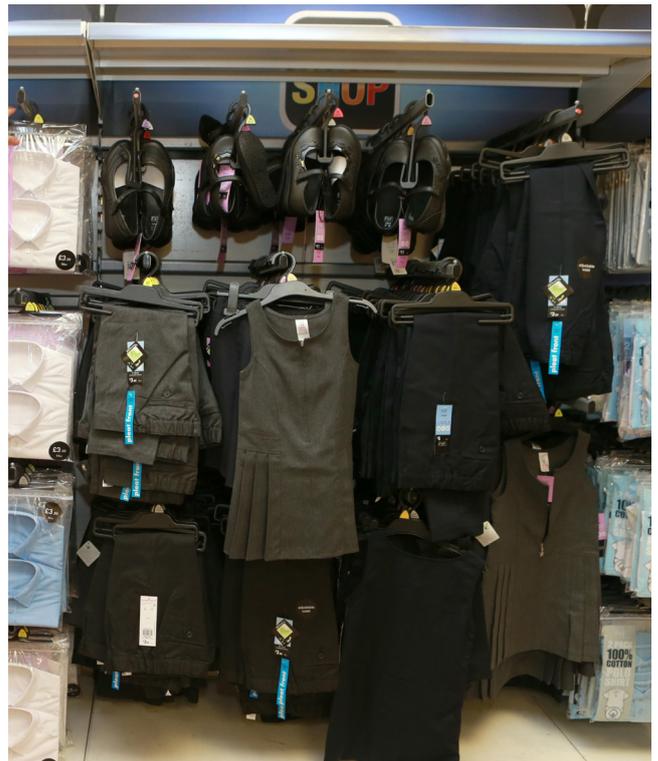
The Minister for Education has previously sent circulars to schools requesting that schools make generic uniforms available. However, this guidance is optional, with no onus on schools to implement this. Meanwhile, 44% of parents say they feel pressured into buying branded goods for their children.

An optional circular alone will not reduce the costs of school uniforms for families. That is why Sinn Féin have published the Affordable School Uniforms Bill. Our Bill would place an obligation on all schools to implement an Affordable School Uniform Policy, to tackle the soaring costs of uniforms for families.

This policy would state clearly whether each item on the uniform list is optional or required, so that parents are not purchasing items unnecessarily. It would ensure that parents can source all elements of the school uniform from a number of retailers so that parents can make an informed, value-for-money choice.

Families have contacted us, who are concerned that their child will miss out on extra-curricular activities such as sports and music groups, because they cannot afford to purchase all of the additional uniform items required. Our Bill would place an obligation on schools to ensure that no pupil is discouraged from participating in school activities due to the expense of these additional uniform items, through keeping any additional items to a minimum.

It is often frustrating for families who have a number of children attending the same school, when changes to the uniform policy means that items can't be passed down to younger siblings. Our Bill places an obligation on schools to avoid frequent changes to uniform requirements, to allow uniform items to be re-used and passed down. It also obliges schools to facilitate the acquisition of second-hand uniforms, through second-hand uniform sales and swap shops. Aside from the lower costs for families, this would also have obvious environmental benefits.



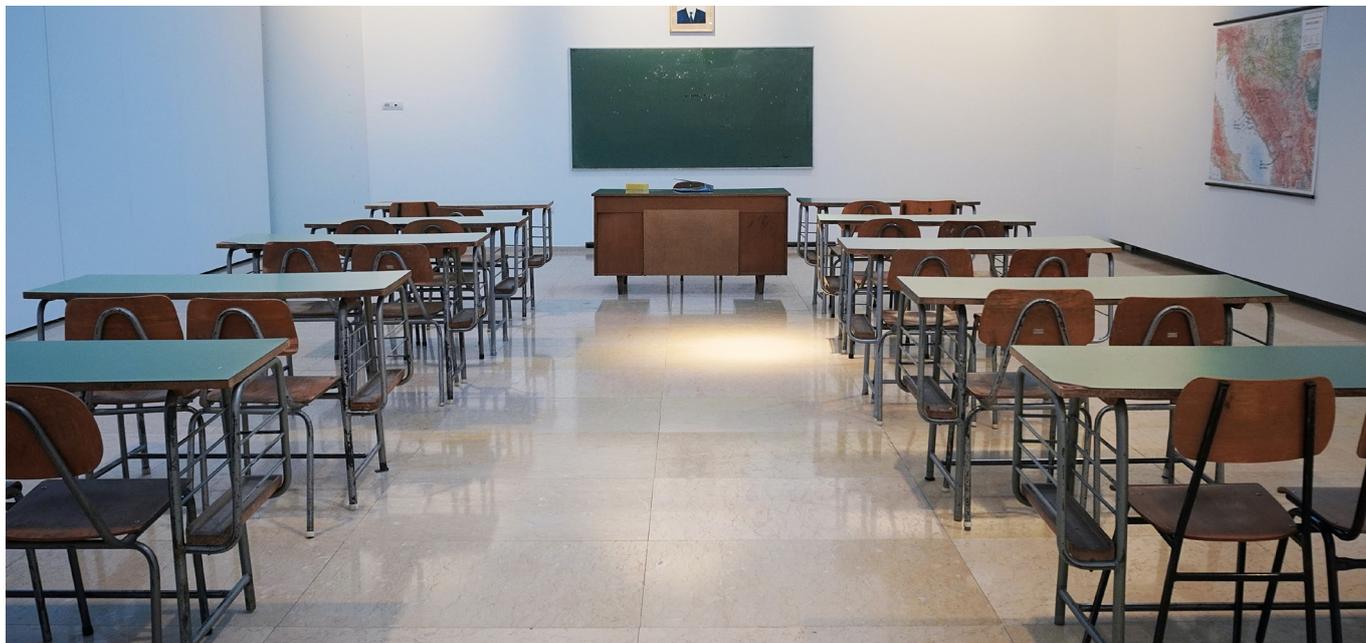
Crucially, the Bill requires that schools take a mindful and considerate approach to enforcing their uniform rules, where the reason suspected for non-compliance is financial hardship.

Sinn Féin would:

- ✓ Enact Sinn Féin's Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill without delay, to ensure all school have a uniform policy that reduces costs for families.
- ✓ Extend powers to the Ombudsman for Children to investigate and make recommendations on how schools are fulfilling their obligations under our Bill to reduce school uniform costs.

Dhéanfadh Sinn Féin an méid seo a leanas:

- ✓ Dhéanfaí Bille Oideachais Shinn Féin (Éidí Scoile Inacmhainne) a achtú gan mhoill, le cinntiú go bhfuil polasaí éide scoile ag gach scoil a laghdaíonn costais do theaghlaigh.
- ✓ Dhéanfaí cumhachtaí a leathnú chuig an Ombudsman do Leanaí chun imscrúdú a dhéanamh agus moltaí a dhéanamh ar an dóigh a bhfuil scoileanna ag comhlíonadh a ndualgais faoinár mBille chun costais éide scoile a laghdú.



CONCLUSION

CONCLUÍD

Despite having a constitutional right to education, the reality is that many children do not have equal educational opportunities, due to a lack of resources. This is through no fault of their own nor their parents, many of whom ignore their own personal needs to provide for their children.

Parents across the state will no longer accept as 'normal' a summer of stress and worry over how they are going to pay to send their child to school in September.

It is not 'normal' that schools have been so underfunded by the Government that parents have to fundraise and subsidise just to keep them going. It is far from 'normal' that the costs of the return to school are akin to a 2nd mortgage or rent payment for families every July.

It is wholly unacceptable, whilst families across the state are contending with a cost of living crisis, that the Minister for Education has not brought forward one measure that would reduce back to school costs for families.

Sinn Féin believe in 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 legislation action, coupled with adequate funding, we can finally bring an end to the summer of stress, we can give parents a break, and we can ensure that equal educational opportunities are secured for all children on this island.

In ainneoin ceart bunreachtúil ar oideachas a bheith acu, is é fírinne an scéil nach bhfuil comhdheiseanna oideachais ag go leor páistí mar gheall ar easpa acmhainní.

Níl aon locht orthu faoi seo ná ar a dtuismitheoirí, agus déanann go leor acu neamhaird ar a gcuid riachtanas pearsanta féin chun soláthar a dhéanamh dá leanaí.

Ní ghlacfaidh tuismitheoirí ar fud an stáit le samhradh strusmhar agus imníoch mar 'ghnáth' a thuilleadh faoin dóigh a n-íocfaidh siad as a bpáiste a chur ar scoil i mí Mheán Fómhair.

Níl sé 'normálta' go bhfuil scoileanna chomh tearc-mhaoinithe ag an Rialtas go mbíonn ar thuismitheoirí airgead a bhailiú agus fóirdheontas a thabhairt dóibh chun na scoileanna a choinneáil a dhul. Tá sé i bhfad ó 'normálta' go bhfuil na costais a bhaineann le pilleadh ar scoil cosúil leis an 2ú morgáiste nó íocaíocht chíos do theaghlaigh gach lúil.

Níl sé inghlactha ar bhealach ar bith, cé go bhfuil teaghlaigh ar fud an stáit ag dul i ngleic le géarchéim chostais mhaireachtála, nach bhfuil beart amháin tugtha chun cinn ag an Aire Oideachais a laghdódh na costais a bhaineann le pilleadh ar scoil do theaghlaigh.

Creideann Sinn Féin san oideachas atá saor in aisce mar is ceart – chun cothrom na Féinne a bhaint amach do gach páiste trí mhaoiniú imleor a chinntiú sna réimsí is mó a bhfuil gá leo.

Le gníomh láidir reachtaíochta, in éineacht le maoiniú imleor, is féidir linn deireadh a chur leis an samhradh strusmhar, is féidir linn sos a thabhairt do thuismitheoirí, agus is féidir linn a chinntiú go gcinntítear comhdheiseanna oideachais do gach páiste ar an oileán seo.



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