

Barnardos Back to School Costs Analysis

August 2009

Introduction

With September looming and the new school year fast approaching, parents are getting their children ready to begin or return to school. This can place parents under a huge financial burden on the household budget. The combined costs of school uniforms, books, sports gear, equipment and stationery can be exorbitant especially for families reliant on social welfare or in low paid employment. The Consumer Price Index in June showed a 4.5% yearly increase in the cost of education¹. Barnardos remains concerned that the ongoing costs facing families sending children to school will place family finances under increased strain and children under increased pressure affecting their education experience and outcomes.

Basic Costs

Following the distribution of a survey to a sample of parents of school going children the subsequent tables give an indication of the costs basic incurred. They do not include school bags, sports clothing or equipment, stationery, or other extra curricular associated costs. The prices for school bags and runners varies significantly from €20 to €120 with increasing pressure on parents to buy top brand items as opposed to cheaper options. Swimming lessons, art and crafts and speech and drama classes also add additional costs for parents, costing around €35 each per term.

Where school book rental schemes are in operation book costs are significantly reduced for parents although they frequently cover only the core subjects which means parents still have to cover the expense of textbooks for the other subjects. The use of workbooks also restricts the ability to recycle through a rental scheme or within families and adds to the yearly expense facing parents.

| Child aged 10 going into 5 th class in primary school | Basic Costs |
|--|-------------|
| Clothing* | €143 |
| School Books | €100 |
| Photocopying fees | €35 |
| Voluntary contribution | €75 |
| Total | €353 |
| Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance | €200 |

* Footwear not included. Average costs of footwear ranges from €20 - €100

¹ CSO (2009) Consumer Price Index, June 2009

| Secondary School – child aged 12 entering 1st year | Basic Costs |
|--|--------------------|
| Clothing* | €385 |
| School Books | €390 |
| Voluntary contribution | €135 |
| Total | €910 |
| Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance | €305 |

* Not including footwear, estimated at between €50-€100

| Child aged 13 entering 2nd year | Basic Costs |
|---|--------------------|
| Clothing* | €245 |
| School Books | €184 |
| Workbooks | €80 |
| Voluntary contribution** | €100 |
| Total | €609 |
| Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance | €305 |

* Not including footwear, estimated at between €50-€100

** Not including extra costs such as locker fees, art & craft supplies etc estimated to be between €25 - €85

Current Government Supports

Despite numerous interventions to combat educational disadvantage, few financial supports are available to low income families to assist with the costs associated with returning a child to school. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) strategy incorporates a series of interventions to address educational disadvantage, operates in 667 primary schools and 203 secondary schools, was exempt from budget cuts in 2009. However, 56 per cent of those from unemployed backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools and these children are likely to be disproportionately affected by recent cuts to supports such as the Book Grant Scheme. Children in low income families will also be affected by the substantial increase in School Transport fees for secondary school students to €300 per child (with a maximum of €650 per family).

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA)

The number of children benefiting from the BSCFA increased from 180,252 in 2007 to 200,246 in 2008, with spending rising from €40m in 2007 to €46m in 2008. The rates paid to families remained unchanged in 2009 leaving the current payment at €200 for children aged 2 – 11years and €305 for children aged 12 – 22years. This means tested payment is intended for those reliant on social welfare and those in low paid employment including those on Community Employment (CE) as these groups that are identified as being at risk of poverty. The income guidelines qualifying families for the BSCFA increased in 2009, widening the number of families eligible to receive the payment. However, the income thresholds remain different for two-parent and one-parent families leaving already vulnerable one-parent families at increased risk of poverty. The BSCFA income guidelines are still less than those applicable to the Family Income Supplement (FIS).

| Family Type | 1 child | 2 children | 3 children | 4 children |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Couple * €26 each extra child | €560.00 | €586.00 | €612.00 | €638.00* |
| Lone parent | €407.00 | €433.00 | €459.00 | €485.00* |

| | | | | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| * €26 for each extra child | | | | |
| FIS income guidelines same for 2 parent and lone parent families | €500.00 | €590.00 | €685.00 | €800.00 |

School Book Grant Scheme

The Department of Education and Science operated a school book grant scheme which was abolished as part of the cutbacks in educational expenditure in 2009. The Grant consisted of funding allocated on an application by the school principal to cover some of the costs of school books for 'needy' children in both primary and secondary school as identified by them. The distribution of this funding was at the discretion of the principal and / or Board of Management and took different forms such as the establishment of a school book rental scheme, book vouchers for the child's family or books being provided on loan. In 2008, over 288,000 primary and secondary school pupils received assistance with school books under the scheme.

Many families will be further disadvantaged by the abolishment of the Book Grant Scheme for non-DEIS schools as more parents will now have to pay the full costs of books. One parent responding to the Barnardos survey noted that book costs had increased by €40 from €80 to €120 for first class and by €70 from €100 to €170 for sixth class because the primary school lost its Book Grant this year. 61% of young people from semi-skilled manual backgrounds and 56% of those from unemployed backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools and many of these children will be further disadvantaged by the removal of the School Book Grant Scheme, as parents struggle to pay increasing costs:

"The school book grant scheme is a great help. I am a lone parent and only earn so much. If that scheme was cut in this school it would put huge pressure on me and the children, if you haven't got it you haven't got it."

Father of Four, Tipperary²

Recommendations:

Many parents dependent on social welfare or in low paid employment simply cannot afford the hidden costs of our "free" education system. Barnardos urges the Government to consider the following recommendations:

- Roll out a compulsory national book rental scheme in all schools across the State. Reinststate the book grants for non-DEIS schools in the interim to support families on low incomes or on social welfare.
- Synchronise the income thresholds up to those applicable to FIS so all family types and all those in receipt of FIS are eligible for the BSCFA.
- Roll back recent changes School Transport Scheme charges, particularly for families in rural areas. Do not increase these charges further.
- Prevent any further cuts to education spending and services.

² Barnardos (2009) Written Out, Written Off