



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

Back to School Survey 2022

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Barnardos

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Introduction

'Schooling is a huge burden on families and it is about time that the government prioritised changes to help make education truly for everyone.' - (Secondary school parent)

A child's right to education is enshrined in the Irish constitution. However, the substantial financial cost of sending a child to school means access to education is anything but free.

'Education should be free as it is in other countries. It should start with free schoolbooks and extend to all costs. No child's education should depend on their parents' ability to pay.' - (Primary school parent)

For over a decade, Barnardos has highlighted the costs incurred by parents in preparing their children to return to school each September. Each year, parents describe the substantial costs imposed on them and the impact that this financial burden has on their family and household budget.

'We are really struggling now and just trying to keep it together for the children. I'm not entitled to any social welfare, I applied and was refused, so we are not entitled to the back to school allowance even though we have literally nothing left after all the bills and food etc. have been paid. I really don't know how we are going to get three children ready for school and it breaks my heart as we are a normal hardworking middle-class family but yet we are finding ourselves on the poverty line.' - (Primary school parent)

Given the recent cost of living increases, it is vital now more than ever for government to set out plans to provide a truly free education to children and remove unreasonable financial pressures from struggling families across the country.

Barnardos calls on the government to prioritise these four steps:

1. Provide free schoolbooks to all children
2. Ensure all schools have an option of an affordable uniform
3. Maintain back to school allowance increase
4. End voluntary contributions

Methodology

Each year Barnardos undertakes an online survey of parents to find out the costs they will incur for their child returning to education in September. A link to the survey is shared with the public through various channels, in the media and amongst our supporters¹. This year the survey was live from the 22nd June to 15th July 2022 inclusive. A total of 1,132 responses were received. These responses represented the costs associated with 609 primary school pupils and 523 secondary school students. The costs examined in the survey comprise the basics required such as schoolbooks, school uniforms, digital technology and voluntary contributions.

Profile of respondents

Our analysis shows that responses to the survey came from a cross section of Irish society, with a representative geographic spread and respondents covering all classes and years within the primary and secondary school cycles.

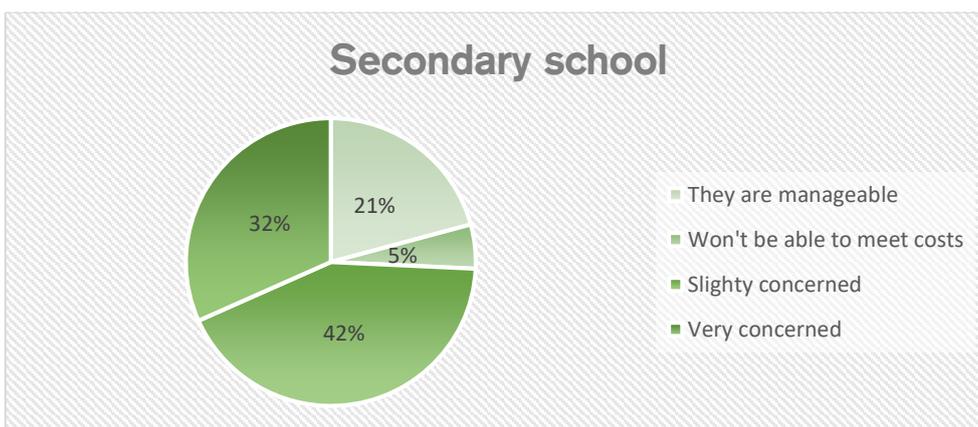
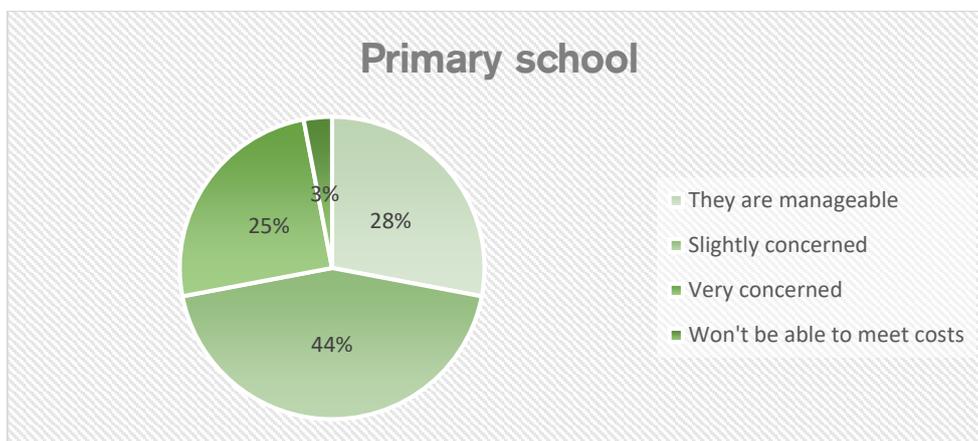
- The majority of survey respondents described themselves as being mothers (92%), while 6% described themselves as being fathers, 1% described themselves as being grandmothers and an additional 1% were other relatives or carers.
- 24% of parents said they were in receipt of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear allowance.
- Parents from every county across the country responded to the survey with half (approximately 54%) describing themselves as living in urban areas and half (46%) living in rural areas.
- Two thirds of parents (65%) were either in full time or part time work, just under one in five (18%) described themselves as homemakers, 5% full or part-time carers, 3% unable to work, 2% students and just under 4% being unemployed.
- Sixty four percent of parents said they were married, 10% were cohabiting with partners and just under 20% were lone parent families.
- The children of the parents who responded to the survey attended an even mix of all school classes and years across primary and secondary school, and attended the full range of schools, with approximately 15% in (DEIS) schools.
- Approximately 40% of parents said they had two children in school, 35% one, 20% three, 4% four and just over 1% had more than four children in school.

¹ Individuals who have agreed to receive information from the organisation.

Back to School Costs

'I'm a single parent with one child starting secondary school and one entering 5th class. I work full time but buses, childcare and school costs hammer me every year.' - (Primary school parent)

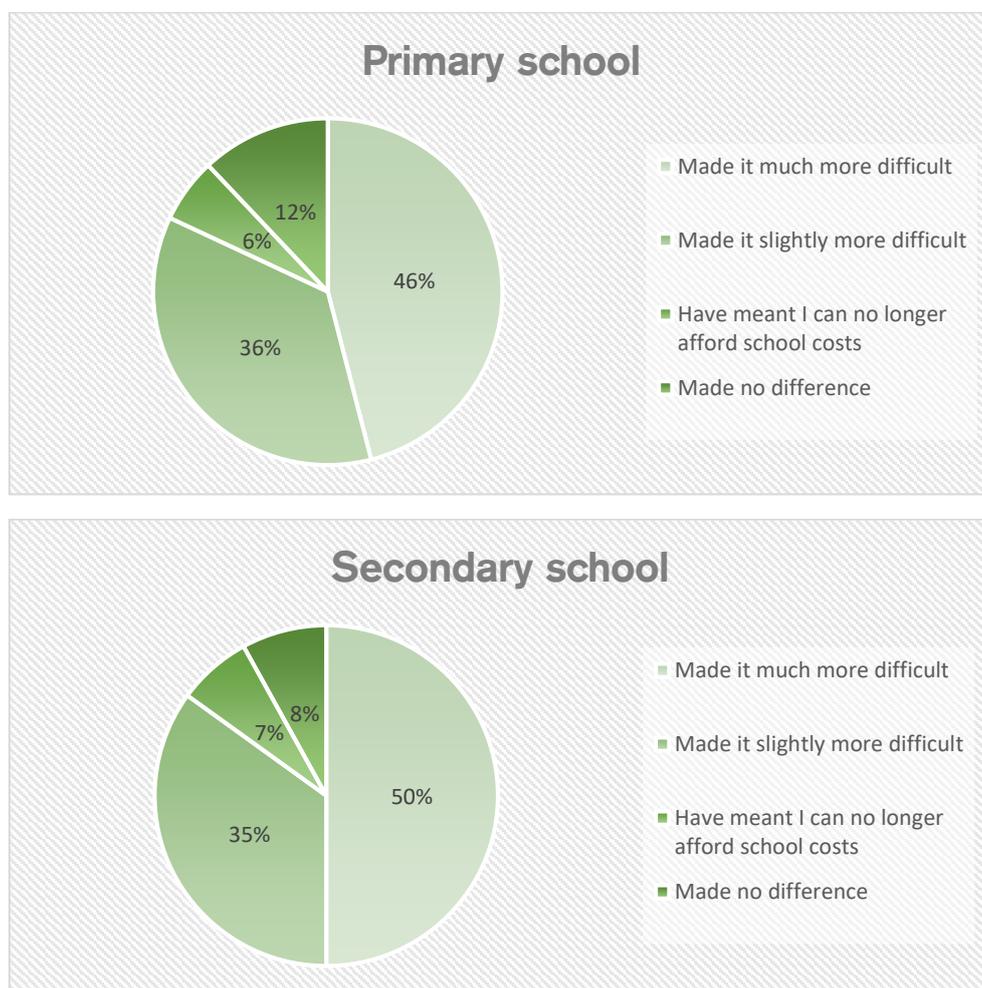
Every year parents across the country face significant costs to get their children ready to go back to school. Below we highlight the main costs involved and outline parents' views on trying to meet them. Overall, it was clear from the survey that parents are concerned about meeting costs this year. Over two thirds of primary (69%) and three-quarters of secondary school parents (74%) are worried about meeting costs this year, (25% primary and 32% secondary said they were very concerned). Alarming, 3% of primary and 5% of secondary school parents said they simply would not be able to meet costs. Only 28% of primary and 21% of secondary school parents said that costs were manageable.



'We are a family of two working parents, we consider ourselves lucky that we both work, however because of this we get no help towards school costs. We have four children one in secondary school and three in primary school. In 2021 it cost €2,224.00 for school costs, book rentals, uniforms, stationery, schoolbags, shoes, etc.' - (Primary and secondary school parent)

'Living in a rural area it's not just the school costs it's also the huge costs of transporting them to school, fuel tax insurance, the living costs in the home of heating and food and electricity. The government need to spend time in the real world.' - (Primary school parent)

We asked parents what impact recent cost of living increases have had on their ability to meet costs. Almost half (46% of primary and 50% of secondary) said it has made it much more difficult to meet costs with a further one third of parents (36%) saying it had made it slightly more difficult. Six percent of primary and 7% of secondary school parents said the increases now mean they will no longer be able to afford back to school costs. Only 12% of primary and 8% of secondary school parents said it had made no difference at all.



It is clear that cost of living increases have placed considerable more pressure on families' abilities to meet back to school costs, placing additional financial pressures on families.

'The increase in cost of living is causing additional stress, I am a carer for my autistic son, only entitled to half payment carers allowance, can't afford reduction

in payment therefore have to return to work full time to the detriment of my child. My child has improved so much while I was on reduced hours to attend to his needs, he will now suffer.’ - (Primary school parent)

‘We still have to put fuel in our cars (which has doubled) just to get to work. I cannot afford oil heating in the house (no fuel allowance for us). I have to make three bales of briquettes last a week. Kids have to wear extra layers to keep warm as we cannot afford to heat upstairs or do their homework by the fire. The pressure on parents to ensure the children don't suffer can be hard at times especially with all the additional costs of school.’ - (Secondary school parent)

‘I am a single parent with three children. Unfortunately the cost of living has increased so much that I am barely scraping by and I have to sacrifice a lot to ensure we have our basic needs met. I don't go on fancy holidays or buy loads of clothes or luxuries. We manage to meet our basic needs and that is it. It doesn't feel like we are thriving it feels like we are surviving.’ - (Secondary school parent)

Costs for parents 2022 -	4 th class	1 st year	5 th year
Uniforms	122	199	199
Books	124	237	221
Digital	50	182	104
Classroom resources*	46	75	66
Voluntary contributions*	82	121	132
Total	424	814	722

* Average amount of those asked to pay classroom resources and voluntary contributions.

Costs for parents - €	2021	2022
Uniforms		
Primary	€116	€ 117
Secondary	€184	€194
Voluntary contribution		
Primary	€79	€81
Secondary	€127	€ 124
Schoolbooks		

Primary	€101	€ 110
Secondary	€ 201	€ 207
Classroom resources		
Primary	€ 40	€ 45
Secondary	€ 61	€ 64

Paying for Costs

Parents were asked how they planned to meet back to school costs this year. Almost half (44% of primary and 46% of secondary parents) said they would pay for some costs through juggling their budgets. One in five will have to go into their savings (19%); 13% of primary and 19% of secondary parents will either get a professional loan or need to use a credit card and a further 9% of primary and 18% of secondary parents will have to borrow from friends and family.

How will you pay for back to school costs	Primary school	Secondary school
Out of normal budget	52%	52%
Juggling their budget	44%	46%
Savings	18%	20%
Borrowing from friends and families	9%	18%
Credit cards	6%	10%
Professional loan	7%	9%

'The government need to realise that people need better supports to cover the cost of back to school. I work and I find it degrading that I have to borrow from people to get my child what he needs for school.' - (Primary school parent)

'I bought all books for 1st year then was told she needed an iPad. I had to borrow for that. I struggled so much last year then Christmas came I was in so much debt I found it hard to pay off. This caused me stress and anxiety - I couldn't sleep at night. I felt like such a failure not being able to provide for my children. I am so worried about this year.' - (Secondary school parent)

Barnardos does not believe parents should be placed under additional financial pressures to the extent they are borrowing money and ending up in debt in order to meet costs that children should be entitled to for free. It is unacceptable that many parents report they have to go without or cut back on other essentials in order to meet school costs this year.

'We will pay for back to school for primary school by picking items up weekly but with another child in secondary school the only way I can pay for her back to school costs by a payment plan with school. It's a humiliating way for me to pay for her excessive school costs but the only way as I would not be able to pay out

€300 at one time for this expense.' - (Primary and secondary school parent)

'Can't afford back to school costs without having to miss meals to cover it. God forbid how we'll heat the house come winter.' - (Secondary school parent)

'I am ashamed to say we are going without eating and our necessities to ensure our children are looked after.' - (Secondary school parent)

Despite parents' best efforts, children often notice what is going on within the household, particularly around parental struggles and pressures. Children should not be feeling anxious over the ability of their parents to meet essential educational costs, jeopardising their wellbeing.

'Children are way more aware of parents struggling to meet costs.'
- (Primary school parent)

'Children's anxiety has increased as they feel their parent's worries - especially around school costs, fuel, heating etc.'
- (Primary school parent)

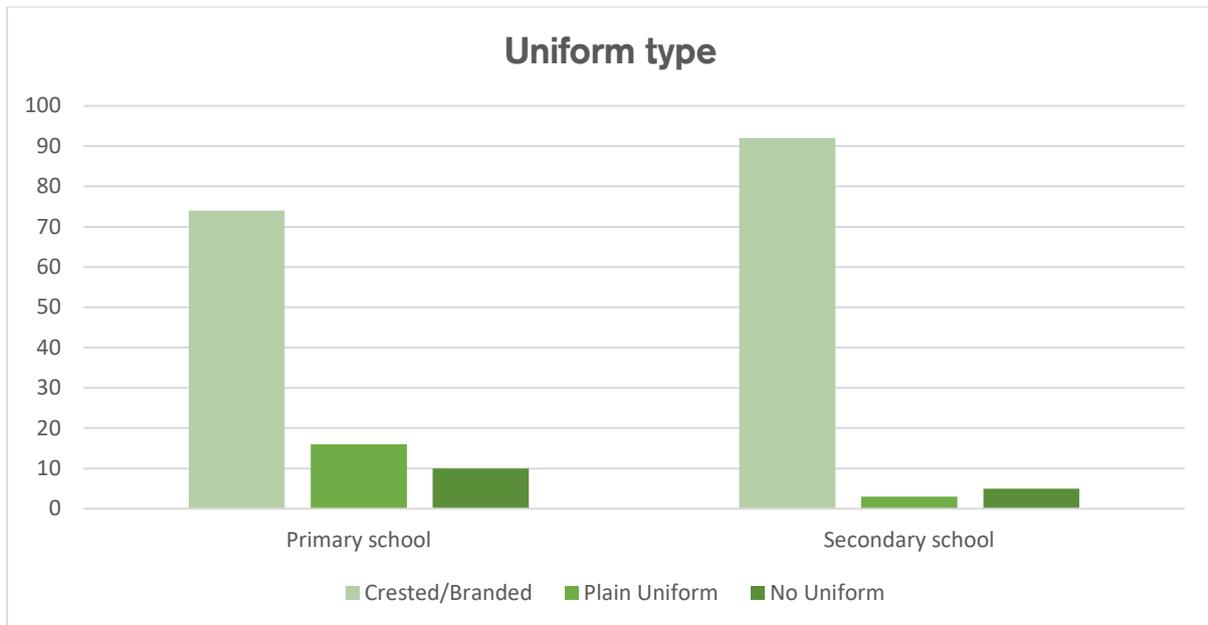
Uniforms

One of the biggest costs parents face are school uniforms. We know from our services that many parents are currently struggling to provide children with suitable clothing².

On average primary school parents spent € 117 on uniforms and secondary school parents € 194. The vast majority of parents, 75% of primary and 80% of secondary school parents, felt costs had gone up from last year, with one quarter suggesting it was by 25-50 euro (23% of primary and 28% of secondary). Less than 2% of all parents said there had been a decrease.

One of the reasons that uniforms can prove to be so costly for parents is the fact that they are required to purchase crested/branded uniforms. 74% of primary school and 93% of secondary school parents who responded said their children had to wear crested/branded uniforms, only 16% of primary and 3% of secondary parents said their children had plain uniforms and 10%/5% said their child had no uniform.

² We know from a survey earlier this year we carried out that 20% of parents have said they and their children have had to cut back on clothing costs over the first six months of this year due to cost of living increases. [Cost Of Living Crisis – Impact on Children | Barnardos](#)



We believe it is important that all schools provide an affordable uniform option, something many of the parents completing the survey agree with.

'Remove crests from uniforms so generic items can be bought.'
- (Primary school parent)

'You need to get rid of the crested uniform so parents can buy more. School tracksuits should be allowed for all years.' - (Primary school parent)

'It's about time the government made generic, comfortable uniforms mandatory to give parents some breathing room and choice in what their child wear to school.'
- (Secondary school parent)

In 2017, the Department of Education recommended that schools should reduce the costs associated with uniforms by opting for iron or sew on crests on school uniforms and wherever possible, choosing generic rather than branded items, including uniforms. Unfortunately, too many schools fail to implement this recommendation.

Many parents responding to the survey suggested their children's school was out of touch with financial struggles when it came to uniforms.

'My child is one year away from secondary school and their PE uniform is 150. This is just the average community school. This uniform was only brought in in the last few years when the new principal decided she wanted a branded PE uniform. Before that the uniform cost 15 for the T-shirt and any navy tracksuit bottoms.'
- (Primary school parent)

'Our school added the cost of paying for PE uniform for the first time in an already difficult time.' - (Primary school parent)

As a result, we believe that the government and Department of Education should consider further measures to ensure all schools in Ireland introduce affordable uniform options. Not only would this reduce financial difficulties for many families but would also ensure that all children would have appropriate clothing and footwear on return to school and throughout the school year.

Back to School Allowance

The Department of Social Protection provides support to help with the cost of sending children to school through the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA). This allowance is available to families on a low income such as those in receipt of a social welfare payment (including Working Family Payment) or taking part in approved employment schemes and recognised education and training courses. Each year, hundreds of thousands of children benefit from the BSCFA. It is a vital benefit parents receive to help them meet the costs of the school year ahead.

Of the parents who completed the survey 24% said that they receive the allowance. Three quarters of those receiving the allowance said it was insufficient to cover costs (72%).

'School clothing and footwear allowance does[n't] even cover half the cost it costs for me to have everything my two children need to go back to school.'
- (Secondary school parent)

'I have three boys. The BTSCAFA is greatly appreciated but is never enough for all three.' - (Primary school parent)

However, it should be stated that the majority of respondents filled in the survey before the government announced their € 100 increase to the BSCFA. Barnardos believe the increase was an extremely welcome step from the government, acknowledging the difficulty some parents are facing and the need for additional support for those on low-incomes to meet back to school costs. It will make a real practical difference to families across the country. However, our survey results demonstrate the need for the increase to be made permanent going forward.

A significant amount of parents suggested the need to reduce the threshold for receiving the allowance, stating that they were struggling to meet school costs but entitled to no state support as their incomes were too high or they were not in receipt of a state welfare payment. Many respondents suggested the allowance should be seen as a universal support.

'Back to school allowance should not be means tested, everyone with school going children should receive this.' - (Primary school parent)

'Children in care are not entitled to back to school allowance I have three foster children and we have to pay everything out of the allowance and no additional supports.' - (Primary school parent)

'Back to school allowance rules should be amended. Cost of living has risen and the guidelines for back to school allowance income doesn't reflect that. My husband earns a wage but not enough to meet all the upcoming rises but earns too much according to scheme.' - (Primary school parent)

If the government doesn't have scope to extend provision of the allowance, one parent suggested that parents should be able to claim tax relief for school costs such as uniforms and books, given that they are essential items of which children cannot go without.

'Parents should be able to keep school receipts and claim something back in taxes if they cannot get any supports.' - (Secondary school parent)

Schoolbooks and Classroom Resources

The average cost of schoolbooks in 2022 for primary school children is €110 and for secondary school is €207. Many parents feel the costs of books are high and believe they should be able to get more assistance in paying for them.

'There should be more costs helped with as books and bags and all other essentials are very expensive and not available to people who don't have spare money on a weekly basis.' - (Primary school parent)

'Introduce free books or else cut costs of books from school book shops. Schools must allow us to use old editions. Every year new editions of books are required from schools and this is costing parents a fortune.' - (Secondary school parent)

Barnardos welcomed the announcement of a free schoolbooks pilot scheme made by the previous Government in Budget 2020. Barnardos would like to see this expanded until all children in school in the Republic of Ireland qualify to receive free schoolbooks.

Some schools provide book rental schemes for their pupils and students. Funding provided under the School Book Grant Scheme enables schools to run such rental schemes or else distribute funding, at their discretion, to those they feel are most in need through the provision of book vouchers or cash.

'Thankfully the book rental is very resourceful for his year and we only have a few books to buy.' - (Primary school parent)

However, while this is a welcome support, not all schools run book rental schemes. In 2022, 69% of parents of primary school pupils and 50% of secondary school students had such a scheme in their school.

Seventy-one percent of primary and 66% of secondary school parents said they were asked to contribute towards classroom resources, of those who were the average cost was €45 and €64 respectively.

Digital Tools

Every year more and more parents are required to spend large sums on digital tools for their children in addition to schoolbooks. Overall, primary school parents spent 46 on average on digital costs while secondary school parents spent €121. Twenty-three percent of secondary school parents stated they had to pay over €300 for digital costs for their child. For parents struggling just to pay for schoolbooks this can be a serious financial blow and mean they have to borrow additional money.

'We have been informed we need to buy our 10 year olds laptops costing 350 euro, on top of their usual books.' - (Primary school parent)

'To start my daughter in 1st year will cost almost 1000 and they also encouraged purchase of a specific laptop for 689 which we just couldn't afford.'
- (Secondary school parent)

'I find it absolutely insane that schools ask you to get an iPad and buy all of the books so you can get a code for the iPad (and books never to be used again). This code can only be used once so we still need to buy the books again for siblings.'
- (Secondary school parent)

There are concerns about the pressure being put on families who cannot afford new laptops and tablets for their children and certainly not one for every child they have in school. There is a risk that children who have less access to digital tools will be put at a disadvantage to their peers, for example someone who has to share a laptop with multiple siblings in comparison to classmates who have their own personal laptops.

Voluntary contributions

Each year, schools across Ireland ask parents to make a 'voluntary' contribution to help fund the running costs of the school for the upcoming year. The fact that schools feel required to do so suggests that many are insufficiently funded by the Department of Education.

Sixty-five percent of primary and 73% of secondary school parents said that their schools requested a voluntary contribution. The average amount asked for of parents by schools was 81 for primary school parents and €124 for secondary school parents. This fee can add significant pressure for parents. Many parents can feel compelled to pay it despite not having the financial means to do so. There is concern about the stigma involved in not

paying for it, particularly in smaller communities. Additionally, some parents are worried that not paying the fee could some way end up negatively affecting their child. Seventy percent of parents said that it did not feel voluntary and three quarters (74%) said that parents should not have to pay it.

'We should not be relying on money from parents for the school to be able to merely function. The government should provide enough for schools to run.' - (Secondary school parent)

'Parents should not be asked for voluntary contributions, but if so they should be nominal, not excessive (in some schools 300 euros or more is being asked) and this is simply not possible for many parents.' - (Primary school parent)

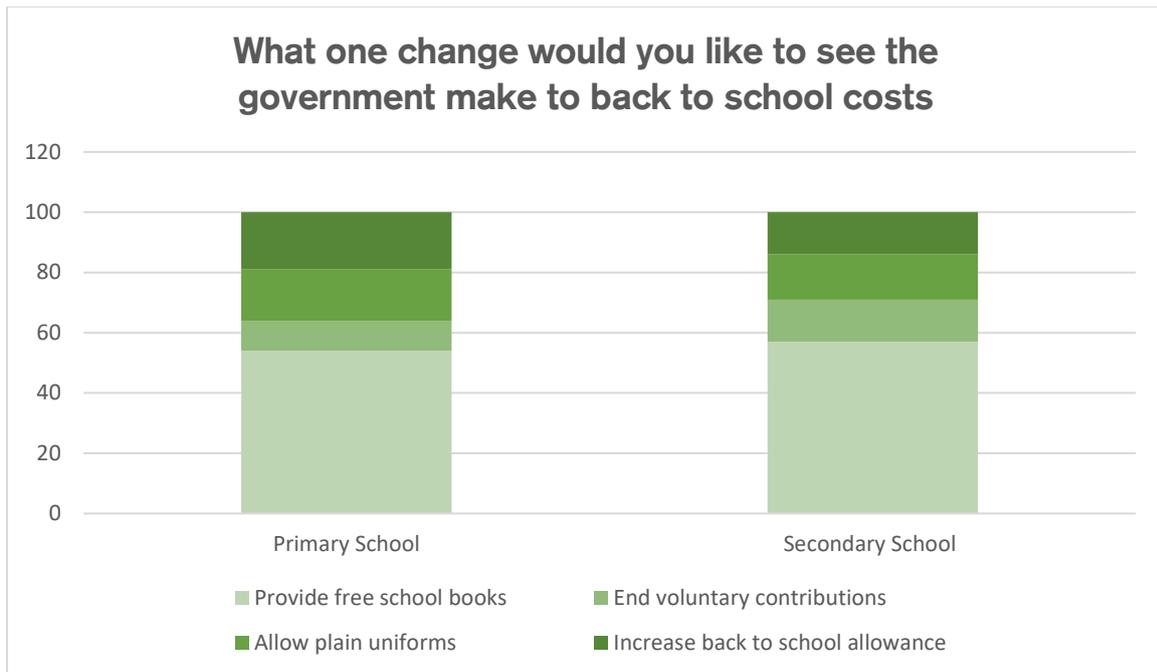
Barnardos do not believe parents should be required to fund the daily costs of running a school. We are aware of parents who avoid contact with their child's schools out of a sense of shame for not paying the fee.

Unfortunately, the practice of voluntary contributions has been going on for decades without any positive reforms to help families and children. The Department of Education should appropriately fund schools, so that they do not require additional income from parents.

'Schools have to lean on parents for the supports not provided by the Gov and Dept of Ed, such as insufficient capitation funds requiring voluntary contributions and constant changing of books from year to year.' - (Primary school parent)

Addressing Costs

We gave parents an opportunity to suggest changes they would want the government to prioritise in order to make costs more affordable for them. The majority stated it should be the introduction of free schoolbooks (55%). An additional 16% said the focus should be on allowing children to wear non-branded/crested uniforms and 12% ending the practice of voluntary contributions.



Some parents felt very fortunate with their current experiences and believed they should be more widespread across the country. For the most part, these parents had children going to DEIS schools, and felt they were well informed of families’ financial struggles.

‘I’m lucky that my children attend a DEIS school. Total cost to the school for each child was 60. This included books, insurance, homework journal and photocopying etc. They also receive hot school lunches, which helps hugely. School do not request voluntary contribution. There is a crested school jumper and tracksuit. However, all other items can be bought in more low cost shops.’ - (Primary school parent)

Many parents who responded to the survey wanted the government and the Department of Education to listen directly to parents in order to find real steps forward in addressing back to school costs and the pressures they bring to households across the country every summer.

‘I also believe that the minister should get a group of parents and teachers who are in the real world to come up with the solutions. There is no point in a committee of people who are not in the education sector, have no children or are well off coming up with solutions, as they have no idea what people, families are really experiencing.’ - (Secondary school parent)

Children's Development

Forty percent of primary and 52% of secondary school parents said their children felt ok about going back to school. 18% and 9% said they are excited and 13% of primary and 17% of secondary school parents said that their children are worried about going back to school.

How do your children feel about going back to school this September	Primary school parents	Secondary school parents
Ok	40%	52%
Happy	27%	19%
Excited	18%	9%
Worried	13%	17%
Sad	2%	3%

Seventy-six percent of primary and 75% of secondary school parents agreed that their children were ready to move into the next year. Nine percent of all parents disagreed. When asked if their children had the necessary supports within their school to achieve their full potential 72% of primary and 62% of secondary school parents agreed, 12% and 13% disagreed.

Parents were asked if their children had adapted well to the return of school rules and routines last year after they reopened. 76% of primary and 65% of secondary parents agreed while 12% and 22% disagreed.

'The idea of catching up puts pressure on children, parents and teachers. We do not have the resources to catch up. Catching up while struggling to keep up is stressful and only increases pressure, anxiety and unrealistic expectations.'
- (Primary school parent)

Regarding academic development, only 55% of primary and 44% of secondary school parents said that their children had caught up educationally, with 26% and 38% disagreeing.

'My child is behind on her reading due to missing school as a result of Covid. The support teacher that was allocated pre Covid is no longer available so all responsibility is on me as the parent to teach her and help her to reach the national reading average for her age.' - (Primary school parent)

'I have only just got both my boys report cards recently and was upset about the decline both boys have shown this year verses previous years, I have made contact with the school to find out what supports are available to them and I'm still waiting a reply. It's not good enough; they haven't had the same time or attention in school.' - (Primary school parent)

Fifty-five percent of primary and 52% of secondary school parents believe that their children have caught up socially and emotionally, 28% and 31% disagree.

'My daughter aged 7 has shown signs of social anxiety and separation anxiety since returning to school' – (Primary school parent)

'Personally I feel Covid was completely forgotten about once we returned to normal. Children were expected to be up to speed on all schoolwork as if nothing had happened. I've noticed a huge rise in anxiety in my child and the children in her class after weekends, midterms and school holidays and they are only 6 years old.' - (Primary school parent)

'Children need more emotional support in schools to help them overcome what they have been through the last three years! My child has suffered emotionally and socially during the pandemic.' - (Primary school parent)

'Socialisation is an issue for my child going into 4th year and government support and advice to schools in this area would be welcome.' - (Secondary school parent)

The majority of both primary, 55%, and secondary school, 65%, parents disagreed that the government had provided sufficient additional support to help children catch up.

'While my son has been able to return to school with little difficulty my daughter going into 4th year has struggled. I do not feel enough support was given to schools in returning to education after the pandemic. As a result our school took a punitive approach to adjustment.' - (Secondary school parent)

Conclusion & Recommendations

Barnardos believes that no parent should face financial pressure and struggles in trying to meet what are essential costs for their children's education. No child should feel any anxiety about their parents' ability to meet school costs.

For many families, struggling to meet recent cost of living increases has meant their ability to be able to afford back to school costs is particularly precarious this year. These costs are placing additional pressure on households already in financial distress.

The Government has increased the back to school allowance to alleviate pressures on families, something Barnardos very much welcomes. However, we think the government could go further and set out plans to provide a genuinely free school system for all children. By investing in our education system and tackling school costs, we can ensure that all children start off with the same resources, increasing their ability to reach their full potential.

1. Free school books

Extend the free school books pilot to all primary and secondary schools

2. Affordable uniforms

The government should require all schools in Ireland to have an affordable uniform option which would include iron on crests or non-branded for all pupils.

3. Back to school allowance

Commit to extending the 100 increase to the back to school allowance on a permanent basis and consider extending the threshold so that more families and children can benefit from the payment.

4. End voluntary contributions

Increase the capitation grant to reduce reliance of schools on voluntary contributions.



Barnardos' vision is a country where no child has to suffer and every child is able to reach its full potential.

Barnardos' mission is to deliver services and work with families, communities, and our partners to transform the lives of vulnerable children who are affected by adverse childhood experiences

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