



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

THE REAL COST OF SCHOOL 2020

Back to School Survey Briefing Paper

July 2020

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Introduction

This year is like no other for children returning to school in September. The Covid-19 pandemic had a major impact on schooling in the first half of the year, when schools closed from 12th of March to the end of June of this year. With no notice parents and children had to come to grips with home-schooling, often while parents also tried to work full time from home. For other parents, losing work through job loss or furlough added to the uncertainty and stress. The impending return to school has been at the forefront of parents' minds, long before the usual August back to school period. There has been an enormous amount of uncertainty and widespread conjecture on what the new school term will be like; but one thing is certain, school will not be the same again.

"I have no clue on what it will be like when she goes back and if she will be safe."

In light of what has happened and the new challenges facing families with school age children, this year the Barnardos' Back to School Survey not only examined the cost of returning to school in September but also the experience of families during school closures and their attitudes about returning to school amid the global pandemic. The findings show parents, struggling to do the best for their children's education, exacerbated by a lack of communication, clarity and support from the State. While parents are still feeling the burden of the cost of sending their child to school, their overwhelming concerns this year are how their child will cope with socially distanced school life; if their child will be safe; will the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Schools be implemented in time for the start of school term; and what will it mean for their child.

Methodology and survey design

For more than a decade Barnardos has been carrying out an online survey investigating the costs that parents incur when sending their children to school at the start of the school term. This year the content and format of the survey has been updated to reflect the effects of Covid-19. To complement the main survey we have also undertaken a 'Children and Young People's Survey' which investigates the feelings of school pupils as they contemplate returning to school this September.

The Barnardos' Back to School survey was completed online by parents with school-aged children from 2nd to 16th July 2020. The survey was advertised through Barnardos social media channels and directly via email with our contacts and supporters. In total 1,765 parents completed the survey; 1,204 with children in primary school, while the remaining 561 respondents' children attend secondary school. There were a further 255 respondents to the Children and Young People's Survey. The majority of the respondents (60%) are in primary school with the remainder (40%) attending secondary school. Responses to both surveys were anonymous.

Parent Survey findings – 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.

- Parents from every county in Ireland took the survey.
- There was a broad geographic spread – 61% of respondents are from Leinster, 25% from Munster, 8% from Connaught and 6% from Ulster – which is largely in line with the national population proportions.
- The majority of respondents (68% of primary school parents and 79% of secondary school parents) were in full-time, part-time or casual employment.
- Of the remaining respondents around one in ten (12% of primary school parents and 10% of secondary school parents) work in the home, 7% are a full or part-time carer while 11% reported being unemployed at time of taking the survey. The remainder indicated they are a student.
- Most parents responding to the survey indicated they are co-habiting or married (82% of primary and 74% of secondary).
- A higher proportion of secondary school parents (23%) indicated they were parenting alone than primary school parents (16%).
- Most primary school parents (67%) send their child to a religious run school, with 15% choosing a multi or non-denomination school and 8% a Gaelscoil.
- The selection of type of school at secondary level is more evenly split with 29% choosing religious non-fee paying schools, 22% community colleges, 14% vocational schools with the remainder split between comprehensive schools, DEIS, multi or non-denomination and private schools.
- 7% of both primary and secondary school parents said their child attends a DEIS (designated disadvantaged) school.

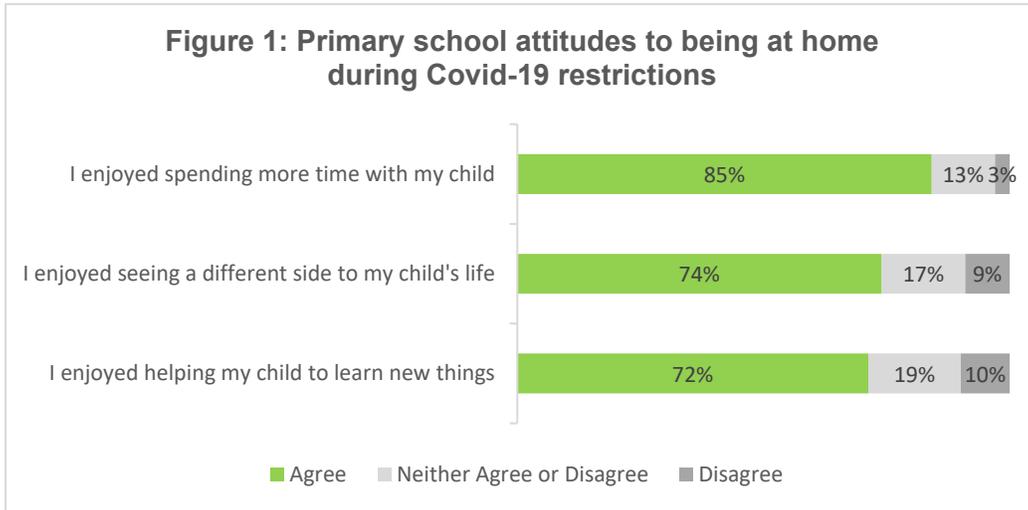
Parent Survey findings – At home during Covid-19 restrictions

The majority of parents enjoyed spending more time with their children as a result of the Covid-19 travel restrictions. As Figures 1 and 2 show, most parents enjoyed seeing new aspects of their child's life and helping their child learn new things. However, of parents who commented about the positive aspects of life during pandemic restrictions most also noted some of the negative effects they and their child experienced as a result of school closures.

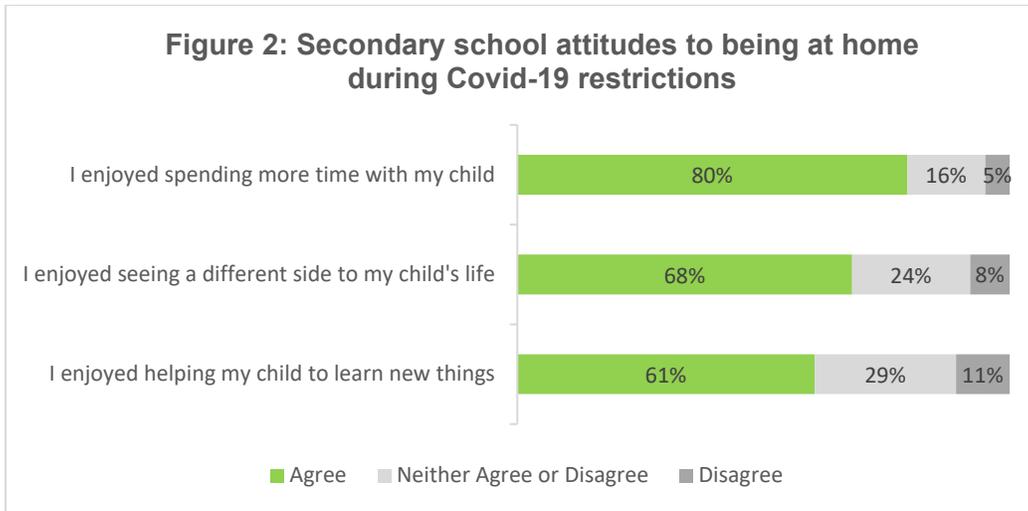
“I have walked with my child and explored nature, we have baked and she has learned how to plan menus and shopping lists, she has practiced some piano and some camogie she has been great but she no longer picks up books and she was a great reader, she loved her drama classes, again hasn't touched it.”

“It's the happiest I've seen my child. She is an anxious child and enjoyed spending time at home with her parents. She slowed down and enjoyed the world around her. She was less stressed and less anxious. We enjoyed lots of outdoor activities like cycling, walking and exploring. Unfortunately we lost

her father last month. The emotional support she would have received from her school is non-existent. It is going to be a long painful journey adjusting to return to school.”

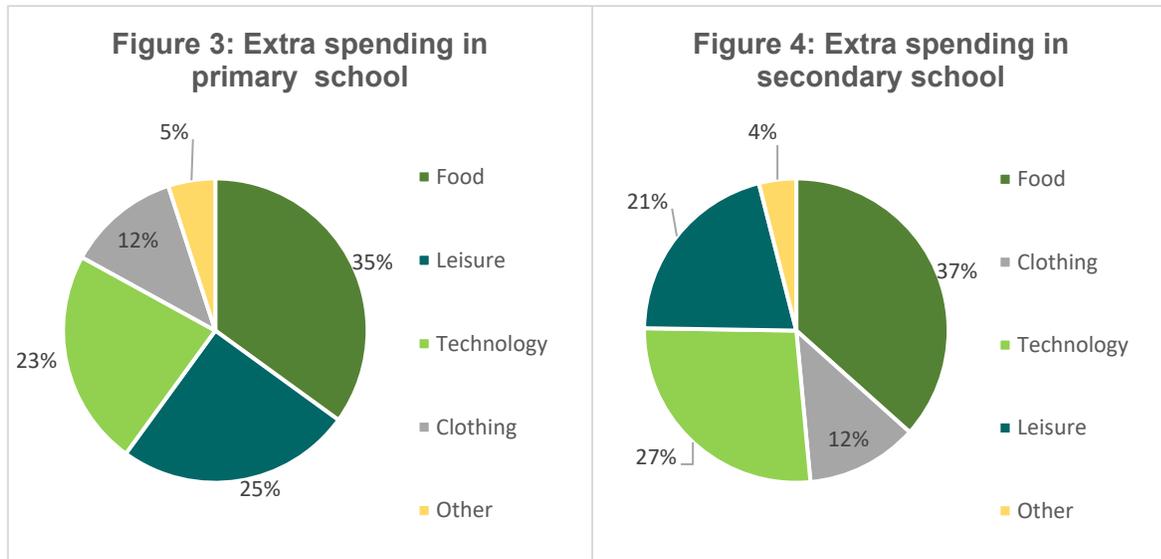


n=1,184-1,188



n=561

Being at home meant extra costs for many parents with 54.5% of **primary school** parents and 52.9% of **secondary school** parents reporting that they incurred additional costs due to their child not being in school from March to June. Food was the most common additional expenditure. The next most common expenditure was leisure activities for primary school parents (24.7%) and technology for secondary school parents (27.1%).



n=651, 1,573 responses*

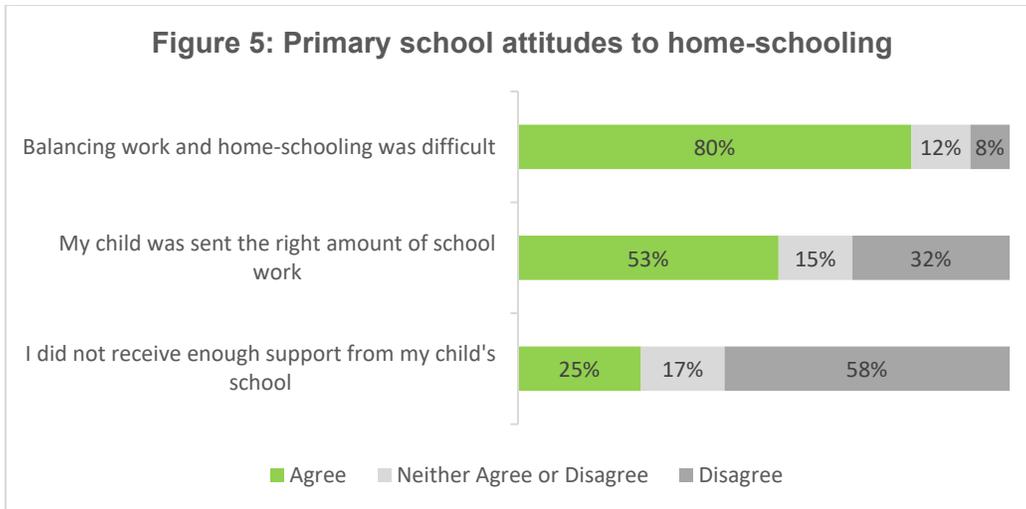
n=297 (712 responses*)

*Respondents could choose more than one answer

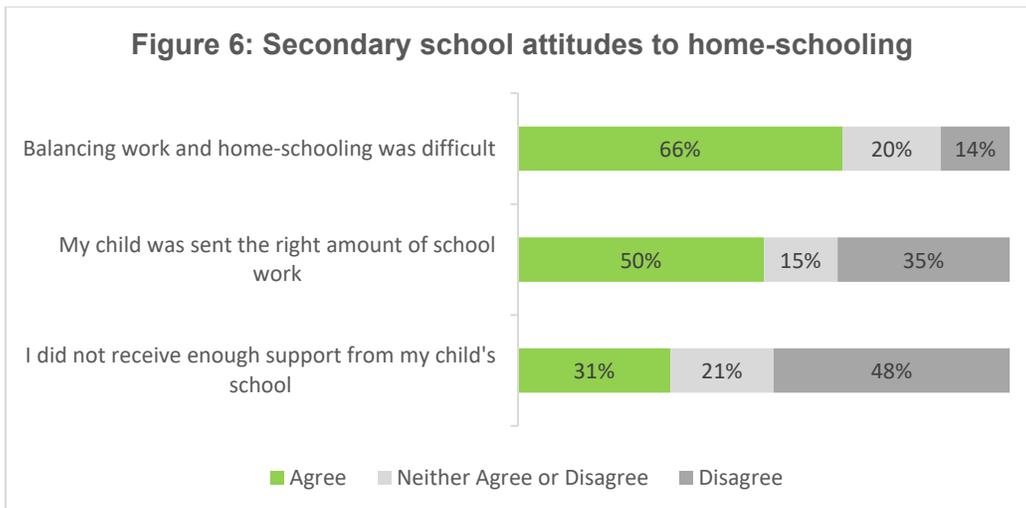
Parent Survey findings – Home-schooling during Covid-19 school closures

While most parents reported enjoying spending more time with their child during Covid-19 restrictions, the broad message received from parents was that they found home-schooling difficult; particularly in the context of parents working from home. Many parents who worked from home in tandem with home-schooling expressed concern about the possibility of having to do this again, either because of a second round of restrictions or if a ‘blended learning’ approach was required by schools. One parent summed up the feeling of many stating she felt unable to give her children “*the education they deserve*”.

“As a working parent it is extremely hard to home-school when you work 39 hours a week on a three shift cycle. I’m afraid he will fall behind as I can’t give him the time he needs. Weekends are the same as you need to do the schoolwork that you couldn’t get done (during the week).”



n=1,183-1,188



n=560-561

Around half of parents reported they felt the amount of work given to children was appropriate. However, a significant proportion of parents (32% of primary parents and 35.1% of secondary parents; see Figures 5 and 6) felt the amount of work sent by their child's school was too much or too little.

“The school have been fantastic in maintaining positive communication from teachers and principal. They have been very supportive of the challenges we have all faced.”

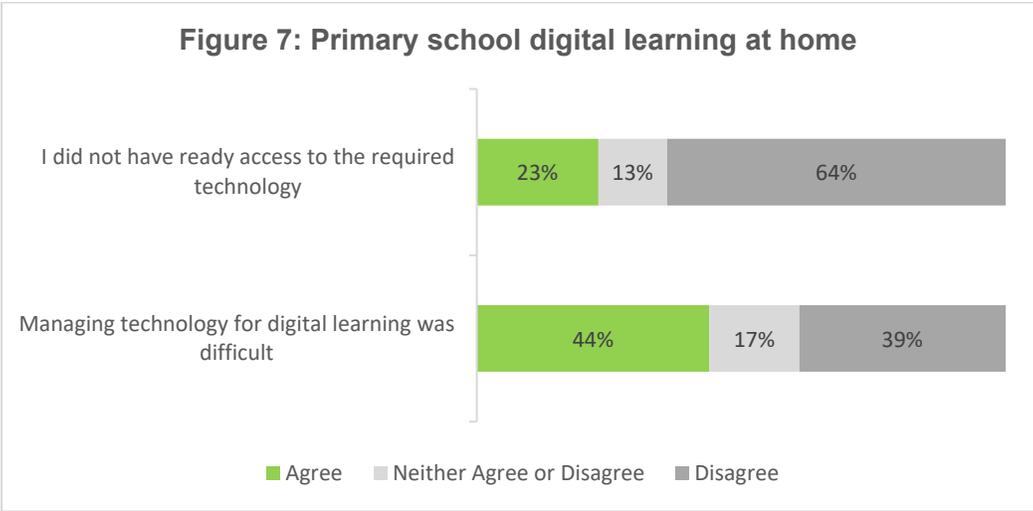
“My child has missed out on a lot of different experiences in school as she was in 6th class. Contact from her primary school was disappointing, a weekly email from her teacher allocating more work than they had been getting done while in class, no guidance as to how to organize the work over the course of a week, all with the proviso that you don't have to do the work led to a very challenging home-schooling experience. We both felt guilty that we weren't getting all the work done.”

Similarly, around a quarter of primary parents and a third of secondary parents did not feel they received sufficient support from their child’s school. Poor communication, inconsistent approaches to online learning, and the amount of work given were often cited as unsatisfactory. However, parents also recognised the role of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in “*providing guidelines*” and felt more could have been done to ensure a consistency of approach.

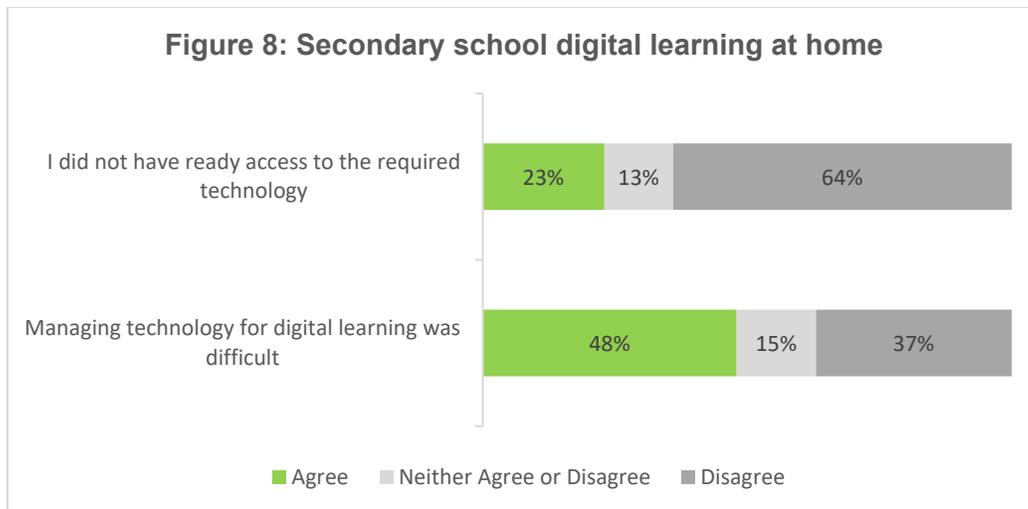
“While some schools were more pro-active and dynamic in how they dealt with the situation during the last school term, my daughter’s school was not - we simply got a list of work to do each week; there was no teaching, no new learning, no support or engagement from her teacher to her, no work went back to school to be marked or corrected, all that fell to me - while I was trying to do a full-time job from home. This is an impossible ask for me as a parent, and resulted in such an unfair situation for my daughter. If this situation continues into the new school year, she will fall behind, through no fault of her own.”

“Our experience with the level of support from our primary school has been extremely disappointing - large volumes of work sent by email on Sunday night with children expected to work alone and upload to google classroom with minimal feedback or support.”

Parents reported finding using digital technology for home learning difficult. Just under half of parents (44.3% of primary parents and 48.3% of secondary parents; see Figures 7 and 8) said they found managing technology while home schooling difficult. In addition, 22.8% of primary and secondary school parents indicated they did not have ready access to the technology their child needed to learn at home.



n=1,184



n=561

Parent Survey findings – Attitudes to children going back to school

Parents want their children to return to school but they want them to do so safely. Even those parents who indicated they were worried about their child’s return or would even prefer their return to be deferred, recognised the importance of school for their child’s development. As Figures 9 and 10 below show, parents recognise the importance of school life for their child’s learning, social and emotional development and their mental health.

Children’s social and emotional development was a major concern for parents, and many felt that being out of school for such a prolonged period of time was affecting their children’s social, emotional and academic development.

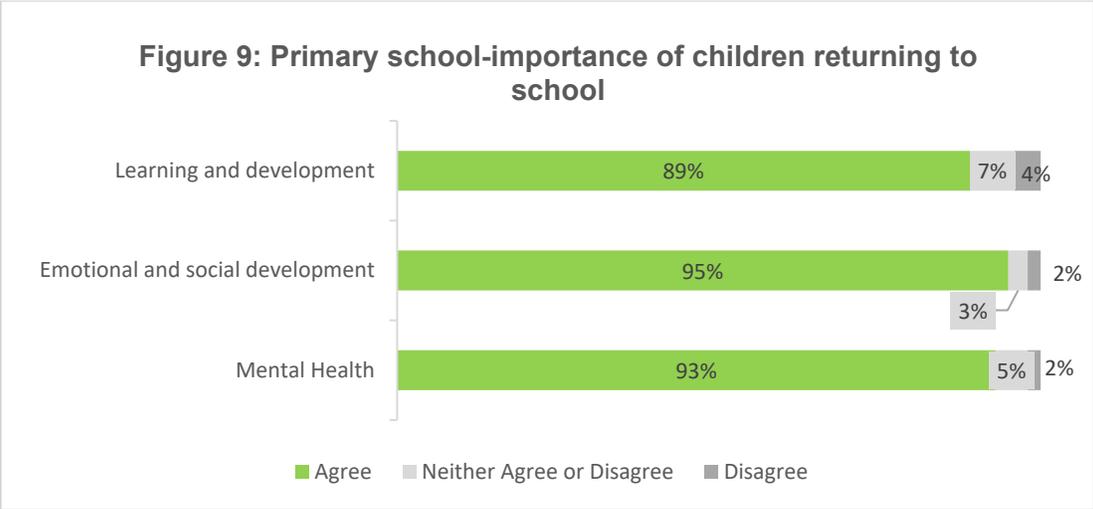
“I’m worried about their behaviour when they return, child has become very anxious, fidgety and emotional being out of our usual routine.”

A mother of a child with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) explained that the routine of school was crucial to her son’s social development, and felt that being out of school has *“regressed his social skills”*.

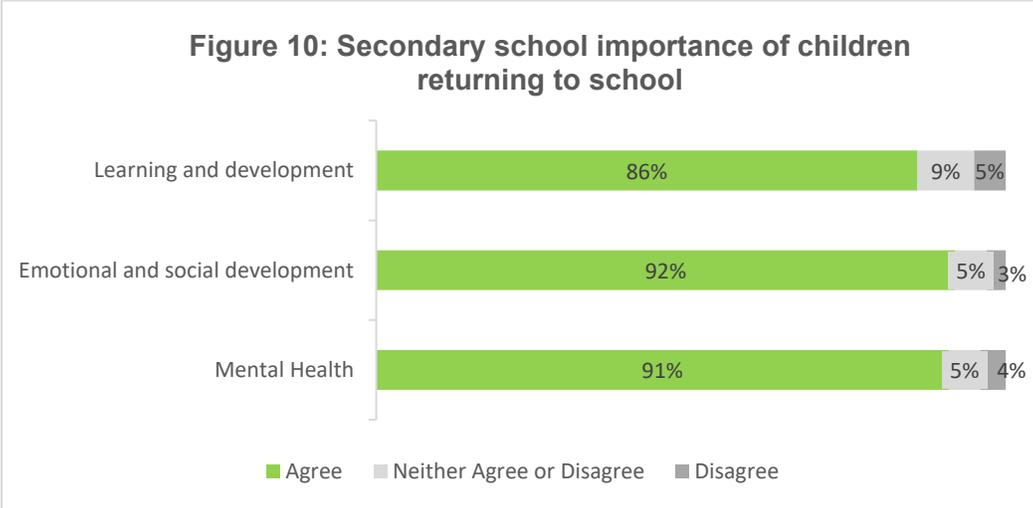
“What about the children that have fallen behind even with support at home? My child struggled with reading and now he is going into 2nd class in September and I do not know how he will catch up. It’s an extremely difficult time. These children who struggle will be a lost generation if something does not change.”

One parent reported that their daughter had become very anxious since March, and often *“cries over missing friends and school”*. Another explained that after having not seen people in so long, their daughter was *“so overwhelmed with anxiety”* that she pretended to be sick to miss a playdate. Parents of older children also worry about the impact that the lack of access to social groups has had on their child. They explained that children being out of school and away from their peers was impacting their emotional well-being, and one parent spoke about their teenager *“suffer[ing] hugely”* with depression

and suicidal thoughts while being in lockdown. Many parents called for additional psychological supports to be put in place in schools to help children readjust to school life and being around their peers during Covid-19. Others hoped teachers would be understanding, as well as provide help to ameliorate children’s stress and anxiety.



n=1,189-1,195

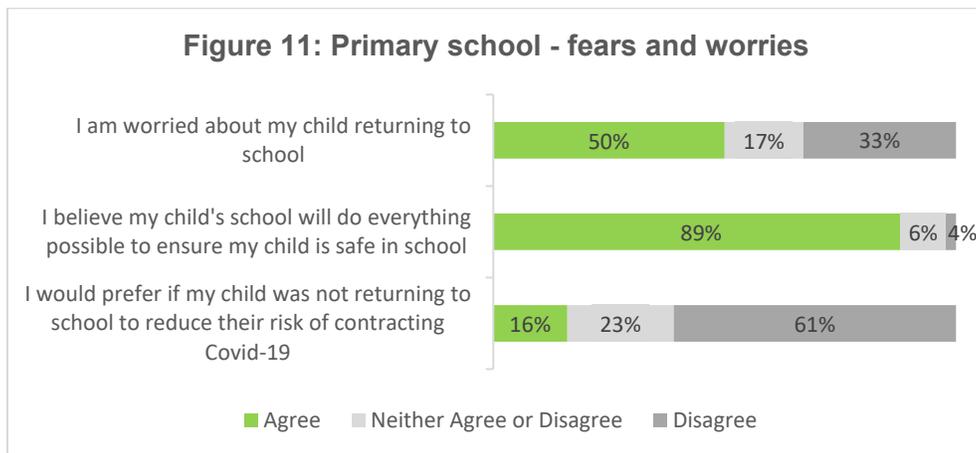


n=558-560

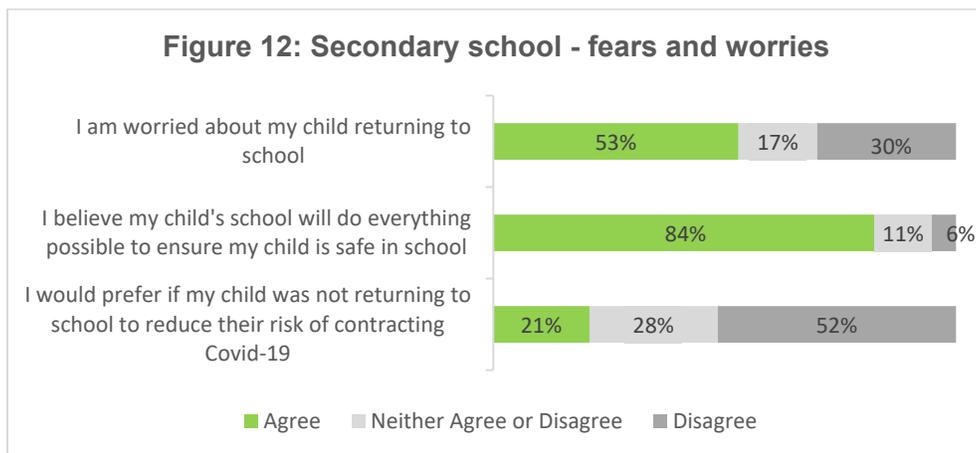
Around half of parents (50.1% of primary and 52.5% of secondary parents) report being worried about the return to school. Furthermore, 16.3% of primary school and 20.5% of secondary school parents expressed a preference for their child remaining home to reduce their risk of contracting Covid-19. Although the majority of parents (89.5% of primary and 83.5% of secondary school parents) had faith in their child’s school to do everything it could to ensure their child’s safety, concerns remained. One cause of concern was children with an underlying health condition, such as asthma, also worried about

the return to a classroom environment and how it would impact their child’s health. Similarly, parents worried about the possibility of their child infecting someone else in the family with an underlying condition, who is particularly vulnerable to Covid-19.

“My daughter is on cancer drugs for arthritis her immune system shocking. If you sneeze on her she can be sick [for] up to 6 weeks. She misses a lot days. [I am] very, very worried about her returning. She has very bad anxiety to be honest before Covid and worse now .I really feel in one way she better off at home but I also want her [to] see people. My head is wrecked worried sick.”



n=1,182-1,186



n=552-558

The practicalities of practicing hand hygiene and social distancing was another common concern, particularly among primary school parents. One parent explained that her children’s school does not

have hot water or soap, and they all use the same towel to dry their hands. Parents were also concerned about older children being asked to follow social distancing while younger children do not.

One parent described it as “*confusing*” having to explain why their older child had to maintain a one metre distance from her peers, while their younger daughter does not. Similarly, another parent described it as “*impractical*” to ask children to remain socially distant from each other, while one mother felt nervous about the thoughts of her child interacting with other children during P.E. or swimming lessons, and wondered how this would be feasible while maintaining one metre distancing.

“I cannot see how the children will be safe, I am so worried, I’ve worked so hard keeping my daughter and two elderly parents safe, following all guidelines only to have it all thrown out the window when 20+ children return to classrooms in September?!?!”

“At this stage with children and teenagers all hanging out together with no social distancing going on all summer it would be ridiculous to make them social distance knowing when they leave school they would not be.”

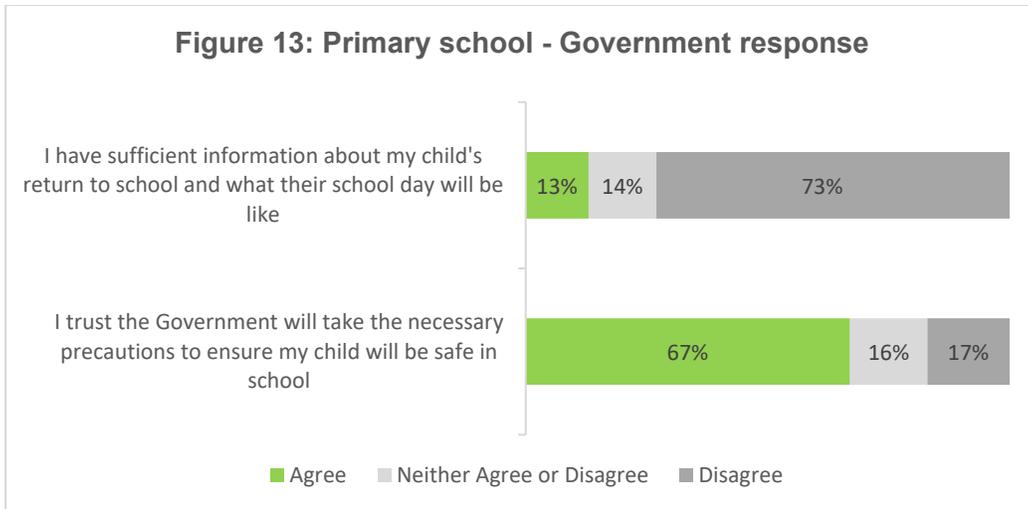
Most parents felt their child is looking forward to returning to school, although the proportion of primary school parents (69.3%) was higher than secondary school parents (54.4%). A small but significant amount of parents (9.7% of primary school and 16.2% of secondary school parents) felt their child is worried about going back to school because of Covid-19.

Transitions, or rather the lack of supported transitions, was a common theme amongst parents’ comments. Some parents worried about children transitioning from primary to secondary, others about those entering an exam year. Other parents worried about the potential difficulties that children with additional needs might have as they transition back to school. Parents highlighted that these children often struggle with a change in routine and felt they will find the transition back to school after months at home extremely difficult.

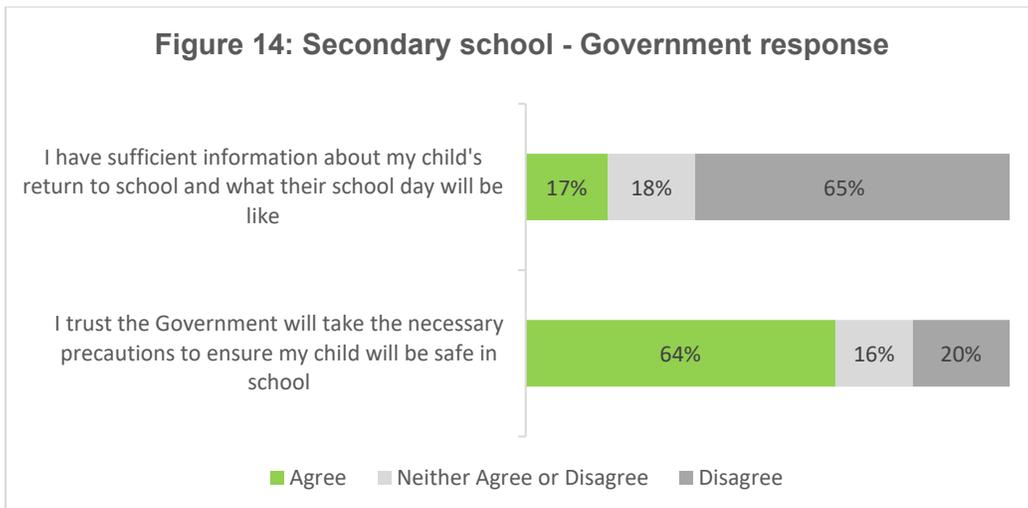
“I am concerned about my child starting secondary school with no transition, potentially reduced In-School hours, blended learning and so on. I also have a child going into leaving certificate in the same school, and will still be working full time as a single parent!”

Parent Survey findings – Attitude to Government’s response

While most parents (66.1%) say they trust the Government to take all necessary safety precautions to ensure their child’s safety in the classroom, one in five parents say they do not. Furthermore, 73.1% of primary school parents and 64.9% of secondary school parents do not feel they have sufficient information about their child’s return to school and what their school day will be like.



n=1,184-1,185



n=556-558

Overall, many parents expressed frustration about the lack of information they have received from the Department of Education and Skills. Parents felt that information should have been provided and a plan put in place for children’s return to school sooner, as they have very limited information and knowledge at present about the logistics of returning to school. One parent spoke about the possibility of a reduced timetable or blended learning and was worried at the prospect of having to leave her teenager at home to essentially teach themselves when she returns to work full time.

“No communication from the Government or the school. Don’t know is the only answer I got from the school. Not fair on the children.”

A large number of parents were concerned or unsure about how social distancing could work in a school environment. Both parents keen for social distancing requirements to be relaxed and those who would like strict guidelines in place were united in their call for more information from Government.

“I am worried about my child catching Covid-19. Because as usual the Government give schools unclear guidelines and no support. If you can keep a two metre distance do it, if you can't then don't worry about it! Same way as they are treating crèches. The government doesn't care about our children. Our schools are overcrowded and way too small so it will be almost impossible for students to go back in with proper social distancing.”

“More clarity is needed on how distancing will be managed. The school has already confirmed the date children are returning but I haven't received any other information about it. This needs to be clearly outlined by the Department. Also, if schools have to close again, teachers should be required to teach online classes for those who can participate. I asked for this and was told not all families have the technology.”

“If the Government aren't willing to put money into the education system for the return of children, they are putting lives at risk. Our schools are not equipped with the resources to maintain schools with [Departmental] funding alone in typical times. If schools are to seek out and use appropriate hygiene measures, which are costly, the wealthy schools will make gains that disadvantaged schools will not. The Department continues to let those working in schools down.”

The Department of Education and Skills waited until just four weeks until the beginning of school term to publish its plans, which caused a lot of uncertainty for parents. The *Reopening our Schools: The Roadmap for the Full Return to School* is ambitious, and while additional resourcing for schools to allow them to open fully for all children are welcome, there is not a lot of time for schools to put plans into action in advance of children's return.¹ Furthermore, there is very little emphasis placed on supporting parents in this plan, beyond a short section of the accompanying *Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities as Schools Reopen* guidance document. Parents will need support in helping their child transition back to school, and similar to scaled approach that the plan takes for young people, extra supports should be readily available for parents who need it.²

Children and Young People Survey findings – Profile of Respondents

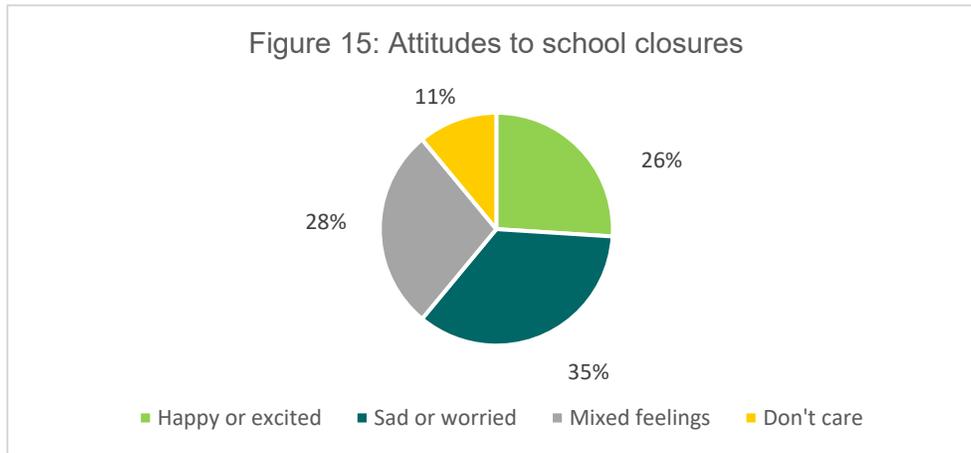
This year for the first time Barnardos conducted a separate survey of children and young people in tandem with the survey of parents. This short survey consisted of six questions exploring how young people felt about learning at home during the March to June school closures and how they felt about returning to school in September. In total 255 children and young people responded to the survey. Of these, 54.5% indicated they were girls, 42% were boys and the remainder said they were non-binary or would prefer not to say. There was a good mix of both primary and secondary pupils with three out of five indicating they would attend primary school and two out of five indicating attending secondary school in September.

¹ Department of Education and Skills. (2020). *COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable reopening of Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas.

² Department of Education and Skills. (2020) *Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities as Schools Reopen*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas.

Children and Young People Survey findings – Home-schooling

Firstly, we asked children and young people how they felt about not being in school since March. The response was mixed reflecting the range of emotions children and young people were feeling about being at home and not seeing friends. The largest proportion of children and young people expressed they felt sad or worried about their school being closed, but as Figure 15 demonstrates the difference is minimal and a significant proportion said they had mixed feelings.



n=254

"I liked being off at first but then it got a bit much. I missed the social interaction and the school environment. I found it hard to motivate myself and didn't enjoy FaceTiming teachers."

Half of children and young people said they loved having their Mam or Dad as their teacher for three months, whereas the other half indicated they did not. There was a fairly even split here also between primary and secondary school.

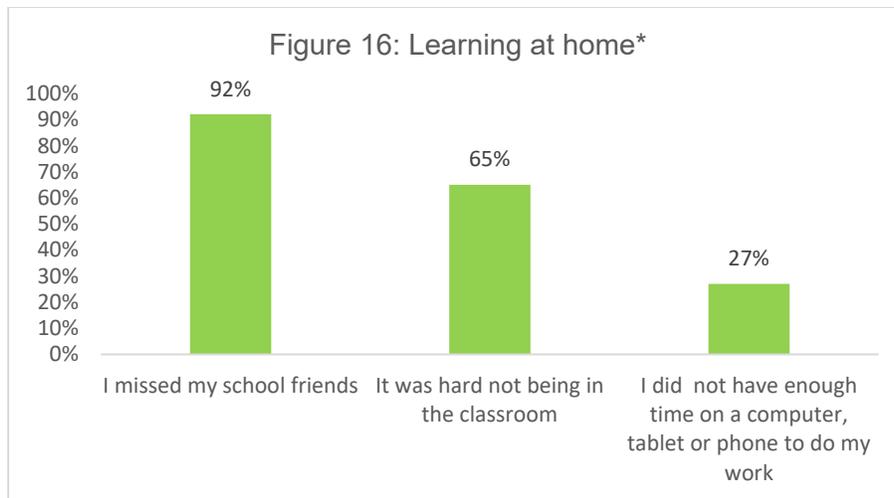
"I don't want to go back. It's better doing school at home, it's more comfortable."

"I'm looking forward to going back and learning in an actual classroom environment. I feel like I've missed a lot by learning at home."

Most children who had siblings said they did not enjoy learning alongside them. Again, there was an even split across primary and secondary school with 64.6% of respondents saying they did not enjoy learning with siblings.

Overall 65% children and young people (68% in primary and 63.4% in secondary) said they found learning outside of the class room difficult. Around one in four respondents (25.5% in primary school and 29.7% in secondary school) said they did not have enough time on a laptop or tablet to do their work at home. This broadly reflects the responses of parents to a similar question about access to technology (see Figures 7 and 8 above).

"I hate online learning. I can't even ask questions to [my] teacher or friends.....I missed my friends we can't see each other since March because we live far away from each other and some can't travel."



n=255, *Combined primary and secondary

There was a resounding response from respondents in both primary and secondary school that they missed their school friends while schools were closed and travel restrictions were in place (92%; see Figure 16). Young people spoke about being excited to return to school and see their friends, but are still understandably worried about the possibility of contracting Covid-19.

“I like school I miss my friends. I don’t like doing work in the iPad it is boring and it’s much more fun in school. I learn better in school.”

“I want to go back and see all of my friends. I miss doing maths quizzes and I miss yoga and PE. I prefer my teacher on the class than my Mom teaching me. I thought being out of school for a long time would be fun, it was at the start but now I want to go back. I think my Mom and Dad will be happier if we all are in school.”

Government response – Vulnerable children and families

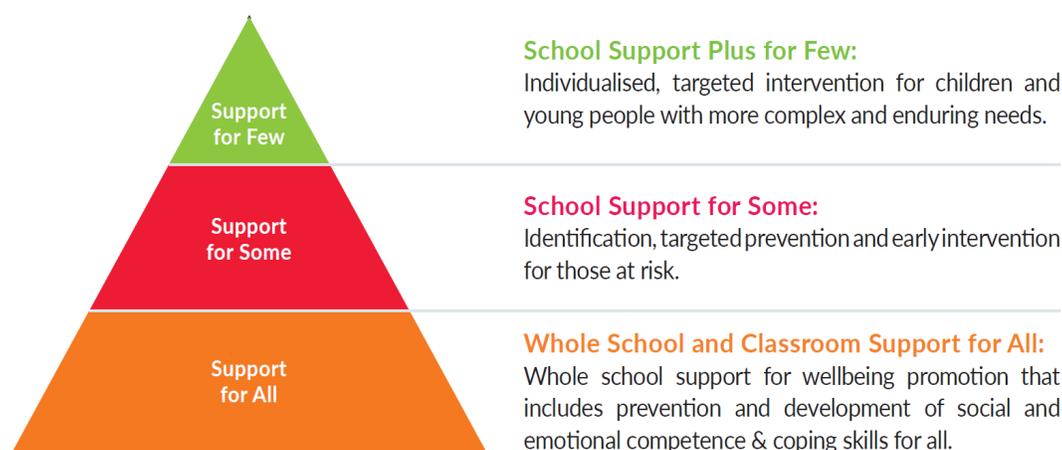
There is mounting evidence that children who were already at risk of harm, those exposed to trauma or who are experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), have suffered disproportionately from the shutdown of schools and social supports. A large proportion of child welfare and protection referrals to Tusla come from schools. In April, it was reported Tusla referrals had fallen by at least a third.³ Children still experienced neglect, abuse and mental health issues during school closures, only they had no respite and few services available to help. Likewise, poor parental mental health, alcohol and substance misuse and domestic violence did not go away; it is behind closed doors. In many cases these issues were compounded by the restrictions placed on movement and the break in accessing support structures and relationships. It is likely schools reopening will mean an increase in child welfare and protection referrals as backlogged issues come to light.

³ The Irish Examiner (2020) ‘Fears for vulnerable children as Tusla referrals drop by third’, *The Irish Examiner*, 27 April [Online]. Available at <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/fears-for-vulnerable-children-as-tusla-referrals-drop-by-third-996344.html> [Accessed 19 May].

Both here and abroad, emerging evidence suggests inequalities have grown as a result of the pandemic. Firstly, because the negative effects on mental health and well-being have been disproportionately borne by disadvantaged groups. Secondly, lower-income groups and young people have been at the epicentre of the sharp decline in economic activity.⁴ Thirdly, and relating to children specifically, existing educational inequalities have been compounded when parents in disadvantaged families became teachers over- night. The Joint Committee on Education and Skills found that the education system as it currently stands is unfair and unequal and that people from less affluent backgrounds lack access to opportunities and outcomes freely available to people from more affluent backgrounds.⁵ This also applies to home-schooling. Research shows children of better-off parents spend more time on at home learning, have access to more resources and are more likely to use technology for home-schooling.⁶ Children from disadvantaged families are more likely to have suffered 'learning loss' as a result of the pandemic restrictions and this should be recognised and responded to.⁷

The Department of Education and Skills' continuum approach as outlined in Figure 17 below is welcome. As is the provision of 17 additional psychologists via the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) and 120 additional guidance counsellors.

Figure 17: Department of Education Approach⁸



Additional provision of teachers to allow social distancing is welcome; however, this should include teachers to provide additional learning supports such as small group and one to one tuition for pupils experiencing educational disadvantage. There must also be provision for increased availability of supports through the School Completion Programme, the Home School Liaison Scheme and the

⁴ Darmody, M. Smyth, E. and Russell. H. (2020). *The Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people*. Dublin: ESRI.

⁵ Joint Committee on Education and Skills. (2019). *Report on Education Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas.

⁶ Andrew, A. Et Al. (2020) *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848> [Accessed 27 July 2020]

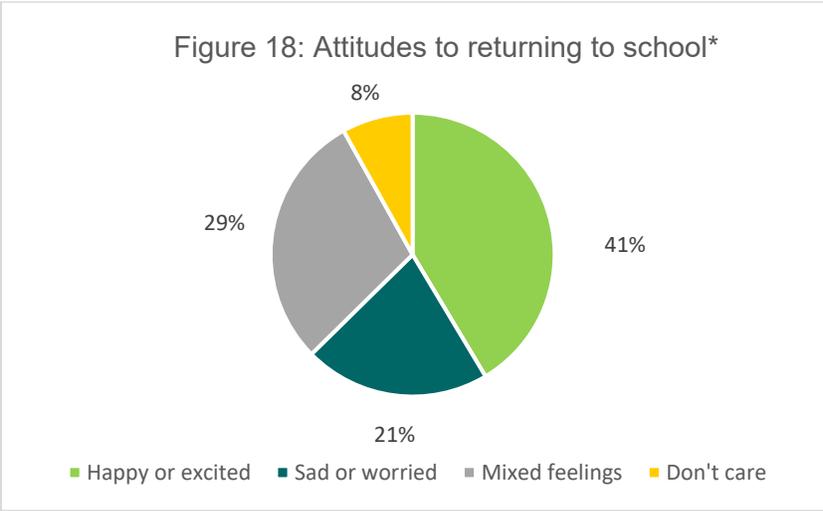
⁷ Darmody, M. Smyth, E. and Russell. H. (2020). *The Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people*. Dublin: ESRI.

⁸ Department of Education and Skills. (2020). *Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities as Schools Reopen: Guidance for Schools*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/52642-supporting-the-wellbeing-of-school-communities-as-schools-reopen-guidance-for-schools/> [Accessed on 27 July 2020].

Educational Welfare Service as offered by TESS. Training for teachers must include direction on how to support children who have experienced trauma during the pandemic restrictions and advice on referrals and additional services available to help these children.

Children and Young People Survey findings – Attitudes to returning to school

Two out of five children said they feel positively about returning to school; but one in five feel negatively.



n=254, *Combined primary and secondary

Two in five primary school respondents and three in five secondary school respondents reported feeling sad or worried and other emotions, demonstrating that children and young people have very mixed feelings about returning to school in September.

“Really excited about starting first year but also worried. I am nervous about being in crowds.”

“I feel really happy because I will be able to see my friends and teacher but best of all I'll be able to have fun!!!”

“I'm scared of getting Corona Virus and I'll miss my mum when I'm in school but I want to go back and see my friends. I hated not knowing what we would be doing every day.”

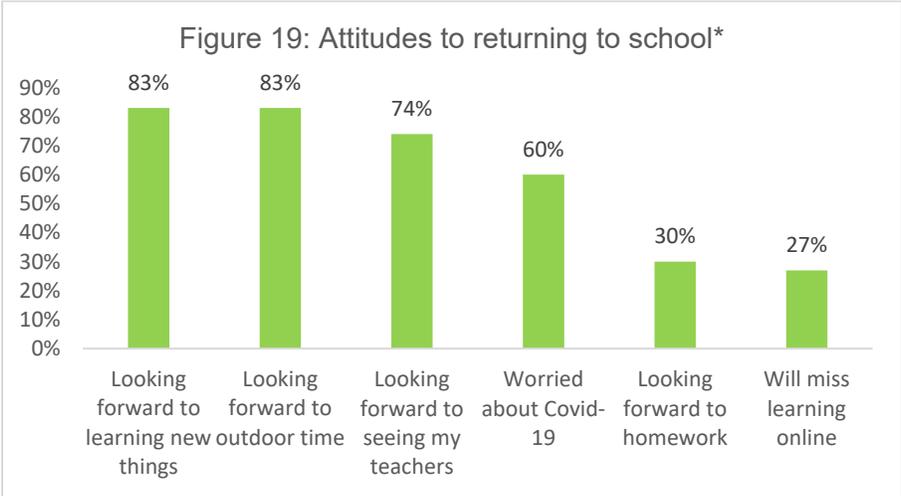
Children and young people said they are looking forward to learning new things (82.7%) and outdoor time such as PE, games or sports (83%). One primary school pupil commented she felt children had lost out on opportunities to get physical exercise during the travel restrictions. Just 28.8% of primary school respondents and 24.8% of secondary school respondents said they would miss online learning. Although, some commented they would miss some aspects and others hoped some digital learning would be retained in the classroom.

“I'd still like to do some activities on Seesaw when we go back to school. I am excited about using Chromebooks in school.”

More primary school pupils (78.4%) said they are looking forward to seeing their teacher than secondary school pupils (66.3%), but a similar proportion of primary and secondary school pupils (70.2%) are not looking forward to homework again.

“I am really excited to see my friends and all my teachers but I wish we had no homework P.S are you reading this Government or mom?”

Returning to School



n=250-255 *Combined primary and secondary

Overall, three out of five children and young people (60%) said they worry about Covid-19 when they think of returning to school. A higher proportion of secondary school pupils (66.3%) report they are worried than primary school pupils (55.6%). Echoing some of the concerns raised in the Barnardos Back to School Parents’ Survey, respondents commented they are concerned about the logistics of social distancing and maintaining hygiene standards in school.

“Worried about getting sick or getting it and making my family sick. I know my friends won’t social distance at all.”

“I am excited to see my friends but I live with my Nana and I am worried about getting the virus and giving it to her. The news said we might have to stick with 3 people this makes me sad and makes me feel really worried as I have girls in my class that bully me. I feel worried what if I get put with one what do I do.”

Some are concerned about a second wave of Covid-19, while others are worried about contracting Covid-19 and passing it to vulnerable family members. Those with underlying health conditions expressed concern about the risk posed to them of returning to enclosed classrooms with 30 classmates.

"I think it's too early to go back in August or September because there [is] going to be a second wave of Covid too and I think we should stick with remote learning for another few months or maybe go to school in groups once every week or fortnight in class groups so that there's not as much people- I would not feel safe as it would be a breeding ground for bacteria and germs."

"I have asthma so I am worried people won't wear masks or keep their distance and that my school especially the bathrooms won't be clean enough."

Similar to the Parent's Survey, children and young people were also concerned about transitioning into a new academic year, or school. A number of children commented they are going into secondary school this year and feel trepidation about the change and not having seen their friends for so long. Some said they are going into an exam year and are worried the effect social distancing or a possible second wave could have on their education. In its 2019 report on educational inequality the Joint Committee on Education and Skills observed that key areas and transitions where education outcomes are at risk of deteriorating include the transition period from primary to secondary school and during examination periods.⁹

"I am transitioning into secondary school so I am a little worried."

"Worried [be]cause I'm going [in]to first year and we didn't do what we wanted in [the] end [like our] school tour and just getting ready for new school."

"I'm hardworking and clever and I want to do well. My school did almost nothing after 12th March, no online classes. So I'm worried for my future that if there's more time at home with supposed online classes, that my school will again do nothing and I'll be left behind my peers in other school and then suffer in my exams. I'm going into 5th year so this is the real start to working towards my career and rest of my life, so it's a crucial time for me. My school is also filthy, particularly the toilets. No soap or towels, I bring my own. So I worry about them dealing with coronavirus."

"I can't wait but I am worried because I missed so much and I am doing the Junior Cert this year. We also don't have good wifi so I found it very hard to do my work."

Children and young people also commented they would like more information from the Government about their return to school. This was particularly the case of older respondents and those entering or already in their final exam years.

"I'm absolutely scared. Going into sixth year during a pandemic like this is the most stressful thing a child can go through. There hasn't been any official information about whether I will be able to return on a full-time basis or not, and that worries me."

"Going into 6th year and very anxious. Would love an update from the government soon."

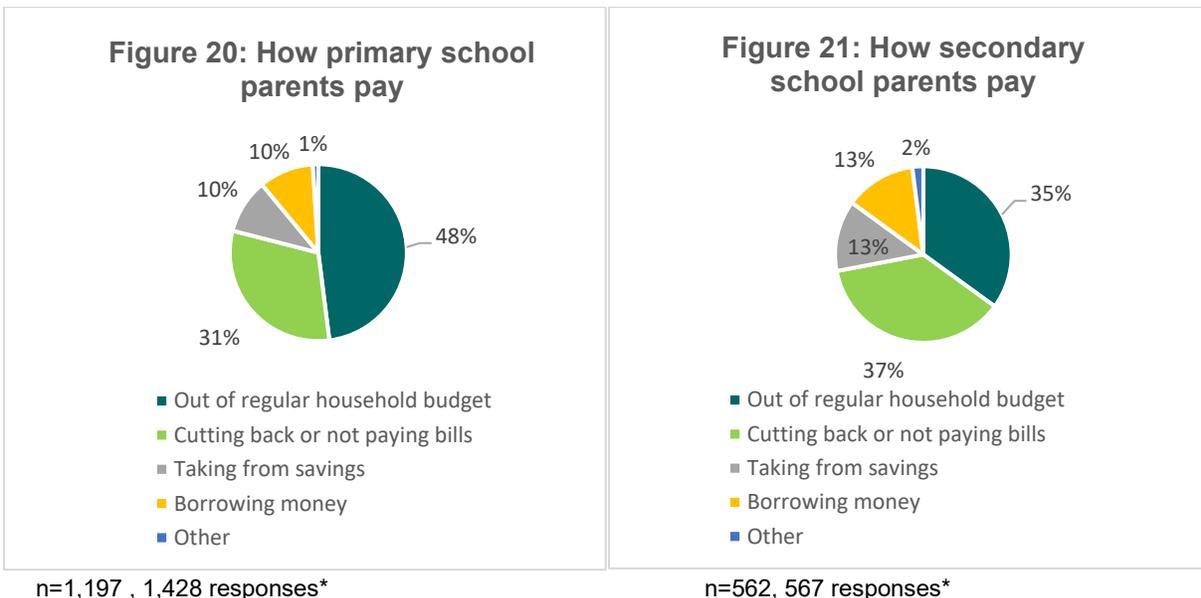
⁹ Joint Committee on Education and Skills. (2019). *Report on Education Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas.

Parent survey findings – How parents pay for Back to School costs

The overall cost of sending a child to school remains high and has not seen any major change since last year. Parents still feel overburdened and are unhappy with the lack of consistency across the school system. Parents report feeling stressed and under pressure to be able to afford school books, clothes and other associated costs. This is particularly true of those with multiple children in school and those whose children are in second level education.

“I have 3 children in secondary school one in first year and two in fifth year. The cost is a very heavy burden as only husband is working and I am not receiving any benefits as I am unable to work for mental health reasons. I think all families who have children should receive back to school allowance regardless of working or not as income only stretches so far and some working families are only over by a small sum to qualify for the back to school allowance. It’s very unfair for ones paying into the system. There is no money for activities to do in the summer. We do without a lot to send them to school. We do feel like the working poor.”

The higher costs associated with second level schools is reflected in Figures 19 and 20 below. Here we see how the proportion of parents who can afford their child’s school costs out of their regular household budget shrinks from 47.8% at primary level to 35.3% at secondary level. Likewise, paying for school costs out of savings, by cutting back on expenses or borrowing are all more common for secondary school parents than primary school parents. This is a clear trend reflected over the last number of years and warrants more attention at a national policy level.^{10 11} Of those that had to borrow, 30.8% took a loan from a credit union or bank, 29% used credit cards, 27.1% borrowed from family or friends, and most worryingly, 13.1% borrowed from a money lender.



*Respondents could choose more than one answer

¹⁰ Barnardos. (2019). School Costs Survey 2019

¹¹ Barnardos. (2018). School Costs Survey 2018

At both primary and secondary level a significant proportion of parents are either cutting back on expenses or not paying bills or taking loans to cover their back to school costs – 40.6% at primary level and 49.7% per cent at secondary.

“The cost of secondary level education in Ireland increases every year. My child will be 18 and legally responsible for herself with no income how is she to put herself through school? The child benefit is cut she can’t receive income. Families depend on back to school grant and child benefit to put their children through school.”

The Covid-19 pandemic has implications for school costs as well. Not only, as reported already, did parents incur additional costs associated with home-schooling, but some parents are unsure about spending money on items which they feel their child might not get full use of if they aren’t in school full time.

“Unsure if I should spend money that I don’t really have on a uniform etc. when they might not be going back and then I will have to spend money on a laptop for each of my children to work from home. We are a one income family and it’s impossible to manage as it is.”

Parent survey findings – Snapshot of basic costs for 2020

This year’s calculation of basic costs is largely similar to 2019. School books, stationery and uniform costs remain the largest expenditure items. Overall costs at primary level are slightly down on last year while costs at secondary level remain unchanged. Seeking voluntary contributions is still common and this is the item which shows greatest increase on last year. This year we asked about overall uniform costs – to include both clothing and footwear which were separate questions in previous surveys. The uniform or ‘clothing and footwear’ is the item which shows the greatest decrease from last year.

Table 1 – Basic School Costs

	Senior Infants Pupil	4th Class Pupil	1st Year Student
Uniform (including footwear)	€120	€130	€235
School Books and stationery	€95	€115	€285
Classroom resources	€40	€40	€75
Voluntary contribution	€75	€80	€140
Total	€330	€365	€735
Total in 2019	€340	€380	€735

Parent survey findings – uniform costs

Uniform costs continue to be a sizeable portion of parents’ overall spend to send their child back to school. The costs reported by parents of primary school children have come down from €160 in 2019 to an average of €135. The costs reported by parents of secondary school pupils have also come down

from €250 in 2019 to €215. Despite the reported costs falling, just 3% of primary school parents and 5.2% of secondary school parents said their costs had fallen from last year. In fact, 34.8% of primary school parents and 41.7% of secondary school parents said their costs had increased. Changes to this year's survey meant separate questions on clothing and footwear costs were combined into one question. It is possible this accounts for the decrease in reported costs as parents may be more likely to indicate higher costs for footwear when singled out. It remains to be seen if this is the case and we will examine if this change continues in next year's survey results.

"I think all schools should have non crested uniform/tracksuits as I find this is such an expensive part of sending a child to school."

"Get rid of school uniforms."

In 2017, the Department of Education issued a circular specifically addressing uniform and other school costs.¹² The circular recommends that schools should reduce the costs associated with uniforms by:

- Opting for "iron on" or "sew on" crests on school uniforms;
- Wherever possible, choosing generic rather than branded items, including uniforms.

School uniform policy is set by the school Board of Management so it is up to the Board to implement the provisions regarding uniform costs contained in the Department's circular. Yet two years after the circular's publication the issue of uniform costs continues to be controversial and when respondents were asked if they had any additional comments to make, many expressed their frustration regarding the cost of crested uniforms.

School uniform policy is set by the school Board of Management so it is up to the Board to implement the provisions regarding uniform costs contained in the Department's circular. Yet two years after the circular's publication the issue of uniform costs continues to be controversial and when respondents were asked if they had any additional comments to make, many expressed their frustration regarding the cost of crested uniforms.

The majority of parents whose child wears a uniform in school say their school opts for a crested uniform. This is consistently raised in our annual survey as a contentious issue for parents, many of whom comment they would prefer a less expensive non crested options. The majority of primary school parents (76%) said their school requires a crested uniform. In secondary school the vast majority of parents (96%) report having to purchase a crested uniform.

"I am a lone parent of 4 children one with autism and because I work 15 hour a week I don't get the back to school allowance. Even though it costs an average of 2000 to send them back to school. School fees and book rentals cost me 1000 last year as my eldest did transition year."

¹² Department of Education and Skills (2017) *Circular 0032/2017*. Available: https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0032_2017.pdf

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) is a necessary support for many families taking the survey. Over 38.9% of primary school parents and 49.7% of secondary school parents have made applications previously. While the majority were successful in their application, around quarter were unsuccessful. BSCFA rates are currently €125 for a primary school pupil and €250 for a secondary school pupil and fall short of the real costs incurred.

“As I receive carers allowance and my husband works we are not eligible for back to school clothing and footwear although every year we struggle as the income limit is so low and they do not take into account your expenditure on house hold expenses etc. I also believe carers should not be taking as a source of income against back to school clothing and footwear and it should be disregarded as it is on medical cards.”

Parent survey findings – book costs

Books remain a significant outlay for parents at the start of the school term. The average cost for primary school books is €110 and the average cost of secondary school books is €225. Just under half (45.9%) of primary school parents and 43.74% of secondary school parents said the cost of their child’s books had increased since last year.

*“Cost of books ridiculous. New editions of books unnecessary.
Use of Workbooks should be eliminated especially in second level, use copies instead
Book rental mandatory for all second level schools.”*

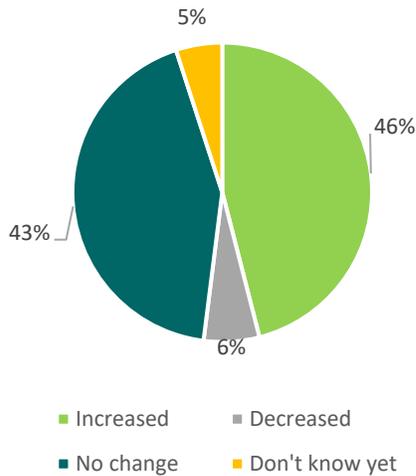
“The school have been fantastic in maintaining positive communication from teachers and principal. They have been very supportive of the challenges we have all faced. Any additional costs this year for school is in line with the higher cost of books related to going up a year in school, nothing to do with the school increasing costs.”

After a decade of campaigning, Barnardos welcomed the announcement of a free schoolbooks pilot scheme made by the previous Government in Budget 2020. The scheme, which is available to more than 15,000 pupils across 100 DEIS primary schools, saw a one million euro investment rolled out this year.¹³ While a welcome development, Barnardos would like to see this expanded upon until ultimately all children in school in the Republic of Ireland being able to benefit from free school books, like their counterparts in Northern Ireland.

Huge variations across the school system remain in terms of the amount parents pay and the volume of books required despite all pupils having to undertake the same curriculum. This lack of consistency and transparency is fuelling parent’s frustration as they feel they have little choice.

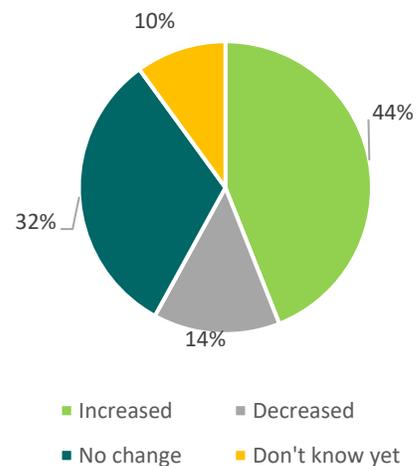
13 Department of Education and Skills. (2020) Minister McHugh announces additional funding of 1 million to reduce the cost of school books in DEIS schools. [press release] Available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2020-press-releases/PR20-01-09.html>

Figure 22: Change in book costs primary



n=1,199

Figure 23: Change in secondary school book costs



n=558

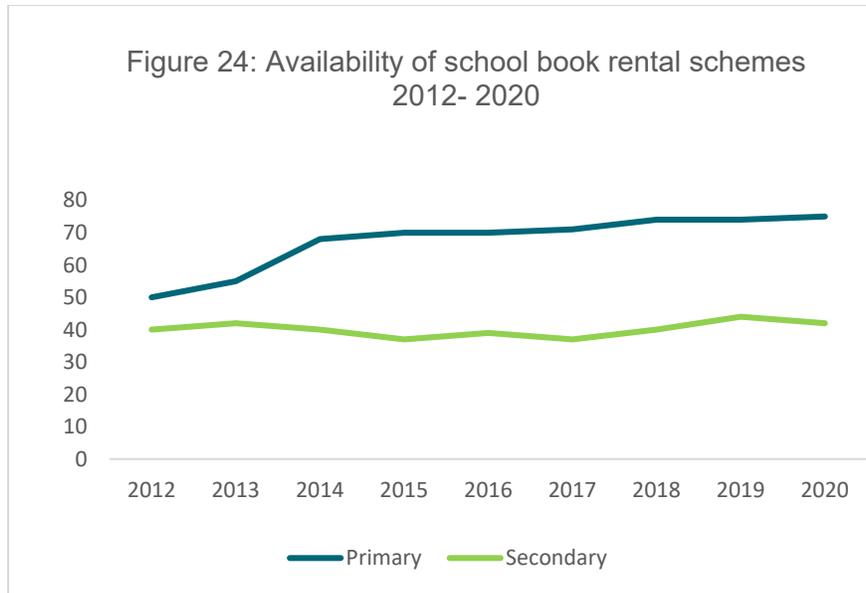
This year the availability of school book rental schemes remains inconsistent. In 2013, the Department for Education published *Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools*.¹⁴ Funding provided under the School Book Grant Scheme enables schools to run such rental schemes or else distribute funding, at their discretion, to those they feel are most in need through the provision of book vouchers or cash. In 2017, this amounted to €16.6m in funding. However, while this is a welcome support, not all schools run book rental schemes and for those that do, different items are included (e.g. some include stationery) and parents are charged different amounts.¹⁵

Three quarters of primary school parents (76.1%) say they have access to a book rental scheme in their child's school compared to just 41.7% of secondary school parents. Parents in primary school pay an average of €50, while parents of secondary school pupils pay €115 on the schemes.

Analysis of trend data from the Barnardos Annual School Costs Survey since 2012 indicates that despite growth from 50% in 2012 to 74 per cent in 2018 access to book rental schemes for primary school has remained static in recent years. At secondary school level access has consistently hovered around 40%.

¹⁴ Department of Education and Skills (2012) *Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools*. Available: <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Textbook-Rental-Schemes-in-Schools/Guidelines-for-Developing-Textbook-Rental-Schemes-in-Schools.pdf>

¹⁵ Response to PQs 35620/18; 36000/18; 36007/18; 36008/18 on School Textbooks Rental Scheme. See <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2018-09-07a.695&s=%22School+Book+Grant+Scheme%22#g700.r>

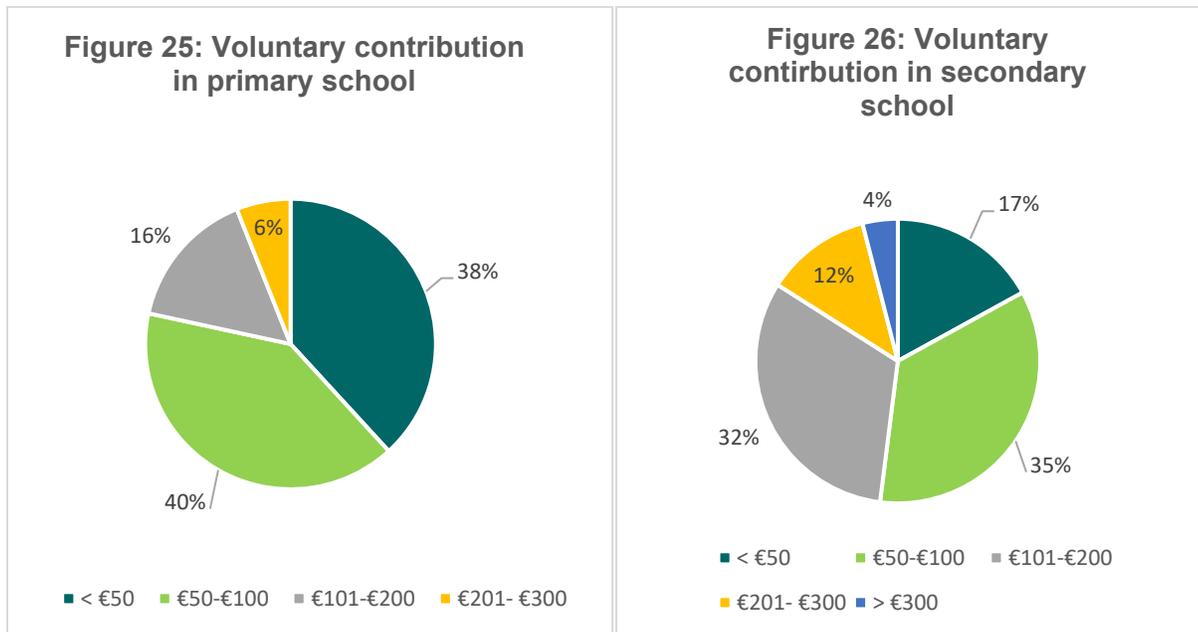


Another area of concern is the variation in the types of scheme available. For those parents who have a school book rental scheme available to them:

- 57.7% of primary school parents and 65.5% of secondary school parents say their scheme covers textbooks only.
- 20.8% of primary school parents and 26.3% of secondary school parents say their scheme covers textbooks and workbooks.
- 11.6% of primary school parents and 5.6% of secondary school parents say their scheme covers textbooks and workbooks, and some stationary.
- Just 9.9% of primary school parents and 2.6% of secondary school parents say their scheme covers all their costs.

Parent survey findings – voluntary contribution and registration fees

At both primary and secondary level, there is continued variation across schools in seeking to collect voluntary contribution from parents, in addition to the amount being sought. In primary school 64.5% of parents report being asked for a voluntary contribution, compared to 74.3% of secondary school parents. This 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 for those with more than one child in the school system.



n=756

n=407

“In my son’s primary school I get regular texts for “voluntary contributions”.....The school is great at demanding money for Voluntary contribution, school tours and art supplies and home etc. supplies yet they can’t supply basic hygiene in the toilets including female sanitary products. It’s disgraceful and enraging. Also, when I was registering my daughter last year, part of the process was that I had to go online and pay the voluntary contribution and have a receipt to proven I’d paid it for going to the meeting that night. I panicked and paid it and when I went to the meeting that evening, I wasn’t asked for the receipt. I don’t know whether it was a full on con? Or whether it was an old form and they forgot it was on it. Either way, that was a good 150d I could ill afford that day!!!”

Voluntary contributions are consistently a contentious issue with parents. As evident in our survey results each year, there is no uniform approach in how parents are asked for this contribution or guidelines regarding what this contribution is spent on or how much it should be. A potential solution to the uncertainty around voluntary contributions is the forthcoming requirement of schools to develop a Parent and Student Charter under the Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill 2016. The charters are seen as a way for schools to engage more closely with parents and pupils in a more meaningful

and transparent way. As part of their wider remit, it is proposed that schools will be required to set out a financial statement detailing how any voluntary monies contributed are spent. The Bill will also give the Minister power to direct to comply with published guidelines governing charters.

However, by seeking voluntary contributions schools are often trying to bridge a gap in their funding for the school year. Without increased investment by the State to offset the need for financial contributions from parents, it is likely this practice will continue. Recent increases to the capitation grants are welcome but the amount paid to schools has yet to be restored to 2010 pre-austerity levels.

Table 2 - Capitation Rates 2010 & 2020

	2010 Capitation Grant	2020 Capitation Grant
Primary School	200	183
Secondary School	345	296

This year the average amount being paid by primary school parents as a voluntary contribution is €80 and the average amount paid by secondary school parents is €125. Most parents pay once a year, but some parents are asked to pay twice a year or even every term. The methods schools use to retrieve unpaid contributions vary greatly with some schools truly applying a ‘voluntary’ approach, while others reportedly put pressure on parents to pay. Worryingly some parents report methods such as children being singled out in class or services (such as a class journal) being withheld, in order to pressure parents who have not paid.

“They also do not give the child in class their individual homework diary until the contribution is paid. If a parent is late paying fee other children and teachers are aware of which family hasn't paid also emails and text messages reminders.”

“[They] humiliate [my] child in school first weeks until I pay, making loud remarks on front of class.”

Some parents are asked to pay a registration fee to their child’s school. The Education (Admission to School) Act 2018 prohibits charging such a fee. In particular the Minister for Education’s Press Release on the Commencement Order for the Act states – “(f)inancial contributions may be sought from parents only on the basis that a child’s place in a school is not dependent on making a contribution”.¹⁶ Despite this, respondents to both surveys indicated that they were required to pay a registration fee – this included pupils and students attending non-fee paying as well as fee-paying schools.

¹⁶ Department of Education (2018) *Minister Bruton commences key provisions in Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018*. Available: <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR18-10-03.html>

Registration fees are less common primary school, with 14.7% of primary school parents are required to pay one. The average fee was €70. Whereas, 42.2% of secondary school parents are required to pay a registration fee and the average fee was €130.

Parent survey findings – additional costs

The number of parents reporting they have been asked by their child's school to fund art supplies, photocopying and communal stationery decreased this year. These fees must also be paid at the start of the school year and add further pressure on parents to provide the essential equipment their child needs to learn the curriculum.

- 66% of primary school parents pay classroom resources fees to cover photocopying / art supplies etc. (around the same amount as 2019) The average amount sought is €40.
- 58% of secondary school parents pay classroom resources fees to cover photocopying / art supplies etc. (down from 78% in 2019). The average amount sought is €65.

Parent survey findings – school transport costs

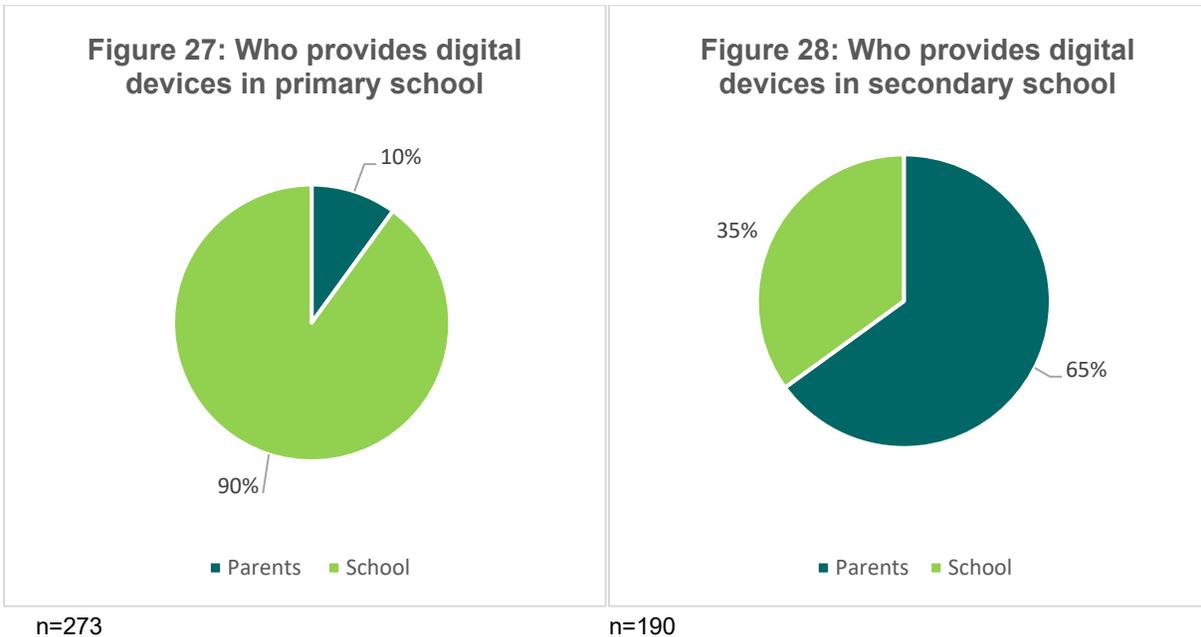
School transport costs adversely affect those living in rural areas as the costs (although subsidised) to avail of the scheme remain very significant. The current fees applicable for the School Transport Scheme are €100 for a primary school pupil (with a maximum of €220 per family) and €350 per secondary school student (with a maximum of €650 per family). Parents have little choice but to pay the fee to secure their child's place on the bus. These fees, which may be paid in July or December, really adds to the pressure and is crippling for some families.

“Cost of school bus I have two going €650. Ridiculous this year so double everything in survey”

Parent survey findings – digital devices

The use of digital learning is on the increase and has been uppermost in parent's minds this year due to recent experiences. The prevalence of children using laptops / tablets in schools has increased substantially at primary level up to 23.1% from 14% last year's survey. The use of digital devices in secondary level remains largely the same at 34.2%.

For the most part devices in primary school are provided by the school, along with software and ebooks etc. In secondary school, the responsibility for providing both hardware and software rests more often than not with the parents.



Conclusion

As parents prepare to send their children back to school this year there are new pressures, new worries but the old pressures and worries have not gone away. Adding to the burden of affording uniforms, books and other financial obligations associated with their child’s education, parents are now worried about the emotional strain placed on their children during school closures, the logistics of children social distancing in a school setting and the health risks to their child being back in school. Parents have also told us how the lack of certainty from Government has added to their worries. Furthermore, by waiting until the end of July to announce plans for schools reopening, just four weeks from the start of the new school term, the Government have added to the anxiety and worry many children and young people are feeling.

In publishing it’s Roadmap for Reopening Schools the Government has set out ambitious plans for getting all children back to school. However, while the focus is understandably on physical health and safety measures, sufficient resourcing must be put into the accompanying wellbeing plan to counterbalance the toll this pandemic has taken on children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Implementation will be key and it is imperative the Government act to protect those children and young people who may have experienced additional trauma during school closures. Furthermore, measures must be put in place to make sure those who already experienced educational disadvantage are not further disadvantaged, or worse still leave the education system altogether.

In 2017 the Joint Committee on Education and Skills published its' report on the issue of school costs.¹⁷ For more than a decade parents have been telling Barnardos about the burden that paying for their child's education puts on their annual budget and daily lives. Measures such as the new free school books pilot and moderate increases to the school capitation rate are welcome; but they are not enough. What is needed now is a courageous approach which seeks not to tinker round the edges of a system that places too great a burden on parents, but aspires to create a system based on equality and fairness that upholds all children's constitutional right to a free education.

Barnardos' vision is a genuinely free school system for all children. We have calculated the cost of funding those items essential for sending a child to school in Ireland today (school books, classroom resources, voluntary contribution, the School Transport Scheme fee and increasing capitation rates to schools). Our analysis, first published in 2015, uses data from Department of Education, findings from our School Costs Survey and estimated population projection.¹⁸ We calculate it would cost just an extra €103 million annually to deliver free primary education and an extra €127 million in secondary education. To put this into context, the Department of Education's overall budget exceeds €10bn annually. An additional €103 million in primary education equates to around €185 per pupil per year.

Recommendations – Covid- 19

- Provide clear implementation guidelines and timelines to schools to accompany the Roadmap for Reopening Schools and the Wellbeing Guidance document to ensure a coherent response across the school system and give clarity to parents.
- Provide principals and teachers with access to trauma informed CPD, wellbeing training and other resources to enable school staff to help children cope with the transition back to school; to respond appropriately to the on-going impact of the pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing; and to manage an increase in child protection and welfare referrals arising when schools reopen.
- Ensure sufficient resources and planning are in place for the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) to respond quickly and thoroughly to the additional needs covid-19 has caused across all three of its services – the Educational Welfare Service, the Home School Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme.
- Provide additional learning supports, such as individual and small group tutoring, for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to bridge the educational inequality divides which may have emerged during school closures.
- Recognise the increased burden Covid-19 has placed on vulnerable children in families where additional needs were already present before the pandemic by rolling out the Programme for Government commitment to increase provision of family support services.

¹⁷ Joint Committee on Education and Skills. (2019). *Report on Committee's Examination of School Costs, School Facilities and Teaching Principals*. Available at:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/reports/2019/2019-07-04_report-on-committee-s-examination-of-school-costs-school-facilities-and-teaching-principals_en.pdf

¹⁸ Barnardos. (2015). *Free Education for All School Children*. Dublin: Barnardos

Recommendations – School Costs:

- Uphold a child's constitutional right to free primary education by committing in Budget 2021 to invest an extra €103.2 million annually to reduce the cost of books, voluntary contributions, classroom resources and transport for parents. This can be phased over the lifetime of the Government, beginning with expansion of the free school book programme in the 2021/2022 school year.
- Commit to investing €126.9m annually to make secondary education free for all children once free primary education has been achieved.
- Ensure school's Board of Managements' adherence to the Department of Education circular re school uniform policy to take tangible measures to reduce the cost for parents.
- Equalise the threshold for Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance for one and two parent families and restore the amount paid to 2010 levels.
- Fully implement the recommendations from the recent report of Joint Committee on Education and Skills in relation to school costs.
- To address the digital divide among school pupils at both primary and secondary levels, develop a grant scheme similar to that available in third level to assist parents to pay for the digital hardware and software required for their child's education.

Appendix 1: Cost of Free Education

	Free School Books	Removing Voluntary Contribution	Free Classroom Resources	Free School Transport	Restoring Capitation Grant Level	Total
Current Exchequer Funding	€20m	€0	€0	€163.5m	€287m	€470.5m
Additional cost to make Primary Education free	€20m	€42m	€19.5m	€5m	€16.7m	€103.2m
Additional cost to make Secondary Education free	€20m	€47m	€19m	€22.4m	€18.5	€126.9m
Additional cost to make education free for all children	€40m	€89m	€38.5m	€27.4m	€35.2m	€230.1m