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# The Real Cost of School *in 2023*

*Back to School Survey - Summary  
August 2023*



  
**Barnardos**  
Because childhood lasts a lifetime



“School in Ireland is meant to be free but the cost every year is almost impossible to meet and getting more expensive each year.”

– Secondary school parent

Every year, for 19 years, Barnardos has highlighted the costs incurred by parents in preparing their children to return to school each September through an online survey, reporting on the pressures parents are directly experiencing in trying to provide for back to school costs. This year a total of 1,148 responses were received. 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.

## Back to School Costs

**“ This year costs will almost break me ”**

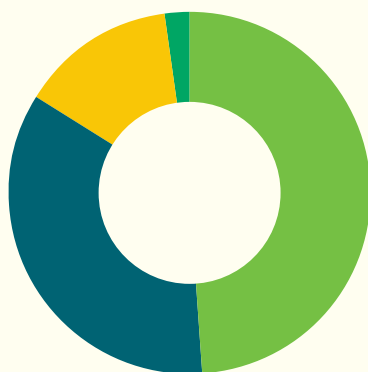
– Primary school parent

Every year parents across the country face substantial costs to get their children ready to go back to school. Overall, results show parents are concerned about meeting costs this summer. Half of primary (50%) and two-thirds of secondary school parents (66%) stated they are worried about meeting costs this year, (14% primary and 27% secondary said they were very concerned).

**“ It costs me nearly €2000 to send 3 secondary school children back to school. It is absolutely disgraceful and is crippling. ”**

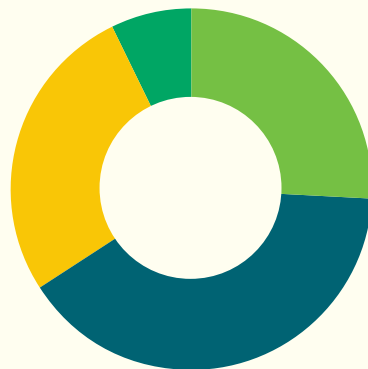
– Secondary school parent

**Graph 1. How do you feel about meeting back to school costs this year?**



### Primary School

■ They are manageable	49%
■ Slightly concerned	35%
■ Very concerned	14%
■ Won't be able to meet costs	2%



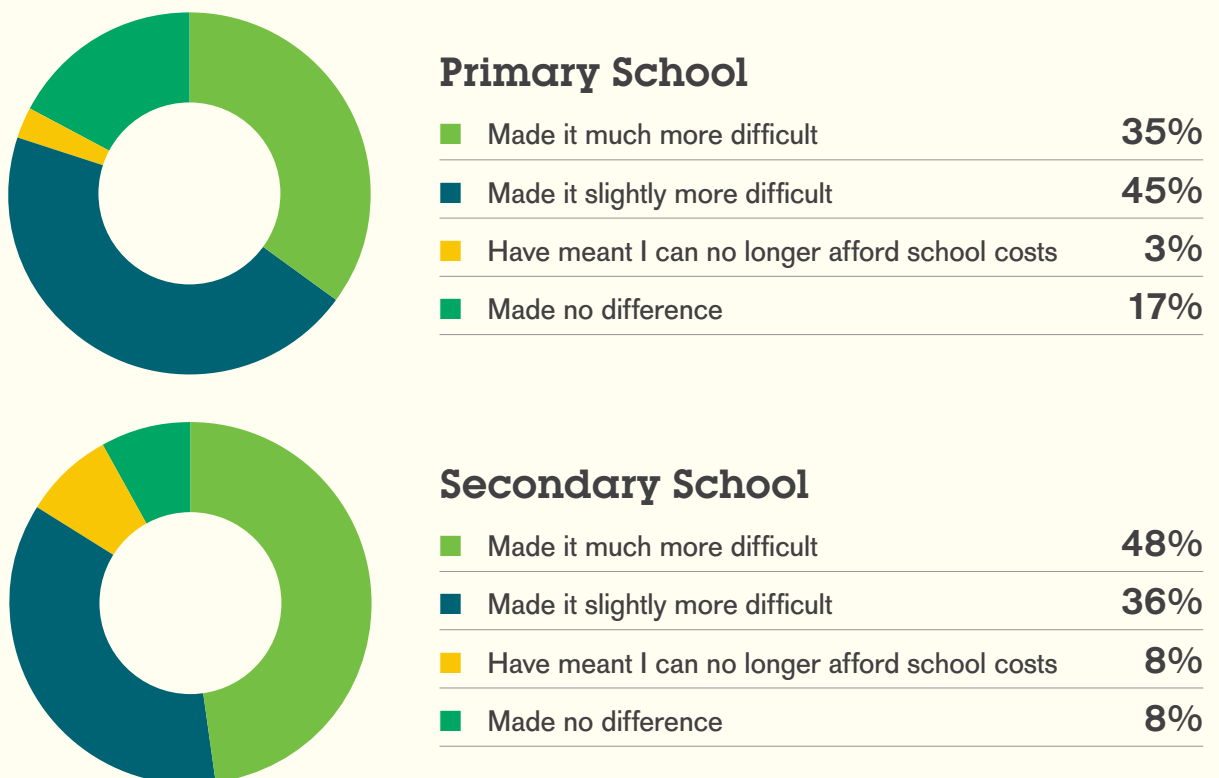
### Secondary School

■ They are manageable	26%
■ Slightly concerned	40%
■ Very concerned	27%
■ Won't be able to meet costs	7%



One third of primary school (35%) and half (50%) of secondary school parents said cost of living increases have made it much more difficult to meet costs with a further two-fifths of parents (41%) saying it had made it slightly more difficult.

**Graph 2. Have recent increases to cost of living made it more difficult to afford back to school costs?**





“With the high cost of bills, it’s getting harder to try and save for back to school cost.”

– Primary school parent

Costs for parents 2023 – €	4th class	1st year	5th year
Uniforms	€121	€226	€208
Books	€0	€232	€234
Digital books/subscriptions*	–	€131	€97
Digital tools	€47	€173	€104
Classroom resources*	€56	€71	€72
Voluntary contributions*	€96	€139	€148
<b>Total</b>	<b>€320</b>	<b>€972</b>	<b>€863</b>

\* Average amount of those asked to pay classroom resources, digital subscriptions and voluntary contributions.

“It is very difficult and such a stressful time. I lie awake in bed with anxiety thinking how will we meet the uniform needs along with the grocery bill. We both work and we have eaten through our savings since January due to the rise in the cost of living for everything. It’s a very worrying time in our lives with another child joining primary school in 2024 and wondering how will we cope.”

– Primary school parent



Costs for parents – €	2023	2022
<b>Uniforms</b>		
Primary	€117	€117
Secondary	€204	€194
<b>Voluntary contribution</b>		
Primary	€101	€81
Secondary	€143	€124
<b>Schoolbooks</b>		
Primary	€0	€110
Secondary	€218	€207
<b>Classroom resources</b>		
Primary	€51	€45
Secondary	€71	€64
<b>Digital Costs</b>		
Primary	€48	€46
Secondary	€147	€121

## Paying for Costs

“ I’m seriously under pressure, sleepless nights with no help from anybody.”

– Secondary school parent

One in five parents (19%) stated they will have to go into their savings in order to meet back to school costs. Six percent of primary and 14% of secondary parents will either get a professional loan or need to use a credit card and a further 4% of primary and 10% of secondary parents will have to borrow from friends and family.

“ It’s frightening. The worry has already started to how we will manage financially with all the school costs.”

– Primary school parent

“ Yes, it is extortion [...] August I always feel is a nightmare month when anxiety levels hit through the roof about how I’m going to pay for everything.”

– Primary school parent

How will you pay for back to school costs	Primary school	Secondary school
Out of normal budget	79%	68%
Savings	20%	25%
Borrowing from friends and families	4%	10%
Credit cards or loan	6%	14%
Back to school clothing and footwear allowance	13%	15%

Some respondents chose more than one option.

## Uniforms

On average primary school parents spent €117 on uniforms and secondary school parents €204 this year. Parents stated that the primary reason uniforms prove to be so costly is due to being required to purchase crested/branded uniforms. 75% of primary school and 93% of secondary school parents who responded said their children had to wear crested/branded uniforms.

Parents continually suggested that schools should be providing generic uniform options with no crests, or iron on crests.

“ My child’s uniform is very nice but unfortunately the crest makes the uniform more expensive to buy.”

– Primary school parent

“ If I could change one thing it would be to get rid of crested uniforms.”

– Secondary school parent



84% of primary school (31% very worried) and 91% of secondary school parents (46% very worried) said they were worried about meeting the cost of uniforms this year. One quarter (28%) of primary school parents and one in ten (11%) of secondary school parents said that their schools offered low-cost uniform options. Over three quarters of parents (78%) said that they thought their children's schools could do more to lower the cost of uniforms.

**“ Schools should offer a more affordable uniform option which are more available at more affordable shops.”**

– Primary school parent

21% of parents said that they receive the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. Almost two-thirds of those receiving the allowance said it was insufficient to cover costs (64%). A significant amount of parents suggested the threshold for receiving the allowance should be lowered, possibly changed to a universal support or double child benefit payment to be received.

**“ Back to school allowance should be available to all families as a one off payment with children's allowance in August regardless of household income.”**

– Secondary school parent

**“ There should be extra children's allowance for the summer months, to help prepare for back to school.”**

– Primary school parent

## Schoolbooks and Classroom Resources

Barnardos welcomed the announcement of free schoolbooks to all primary school children in Budget 2023. This will make a substantial difference to families across the country. Parents themselves repeatedly stated what a welcome measure it was. However, they wanted to see it expanded to secondary level students.

**“ The free books for primary school is good help, should be for secondary schools too.”**

– Secondary school parent

**“ The new primary school book scheme is great. Secondary though is financially difficult, very expensive books.”**

– Secondary school parent





In 2023, less than half of parents of secondary school students (44%) had such a book rental scheme in their school. Of those who do have access to a book rental scheme over half (56%) said they had to contribute more than €100 to the scheme for their child.

Almost half of secondary school parents (45%) said they had to pay for digital subscriptions for the children on top of buying physical books. On average, those who had to pay for digital subscriptions spent €106 on them.

**“Secondary school children should not have to buy the hardcopy of books as well as the digital subscription.”**

– Secondary school parent

Eighty-four percent of primary and 67% of secondary school parents said they were asked to contribute towards classroom resources, of those who were the average cost was €51 and €71 respectively.



## Digital Tools

Overall, primary school parents spent €48 on average on digital costs while secondary school parents spent €147. One-third (32%) of secondary school parents stated they had to pay over €300 for digital costs for their child.

*“ We have to get a tablet for our son at a cost at €700.”*

– Secondary school parent

*“ iPad school, must buy iPad in first year over €900.”*

– Secondary school parent

*“ My child will start secondary school in 2024 and the school we’re applying to will not let them start unless they purchase an iPad from them which costs €1300. This is ludicrous.”*

– Secondary school parent



## Voluntary contributions

“ I will go without essentials to make sure my school financial contribution will be met. Some children are made to feel inferior when they are – very publicly – not given a journal or locker key.”

– Secondary school parent

Seventy-four percent of primary and 78% of secondary school parents said that their schools requested a voluntary contribution. The average amount asked for of parents by schools was €101 for primary school parents and €143 for secondary school parents. Over two-thirds of parents (67%) said that it did not feel voluntary. Four in five secondary school parents (80%) and two thirds of primary school parents (68%) said that parents should not have to pay it.

Some parents stated that they are worried that not paying the fee could some way end up negatively affecting their child. Others suggested it means that children go without things such as journals and lockers, essential elements of school life.

“ The school [...] are also regularly sending reminders via the app about voluntary contributions where feels very pressuring.”

– Secondary school parent

“ My school told me that they weren't really voluntary even though they were called that and that every child would have to pay.”

– Secondary school parent

“ It's not voluntary it's madness. If we don't pay they don't get journals or lockers and they are a must.”

– Secondary school parent

Parents consistently stated that voluntary contributions should be abolished, that the government should fully fund schools so that they don't have to rely on these peculiar fees imposed on parents.

“ Fund schools enough that voluntary contributions are not required.”

– Secondary school parent

“ Government should fund schools so that they should not have to ask for voluntary contributions.”

– Secondary school parent

## Recommendations



**1. Free school books** – Extend free schoolbooks to all secondary schools.

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**2. Low-cost uniforms** – Department of Education should mandate that all schools in Ireland introduce low-cost uniform options.

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**3. Back to School Footwear and Clothing allowance and Child Benefit** – Commit to extending the €100 increase to the back to school allowance on a permanent basis, and extend Child Benefit.

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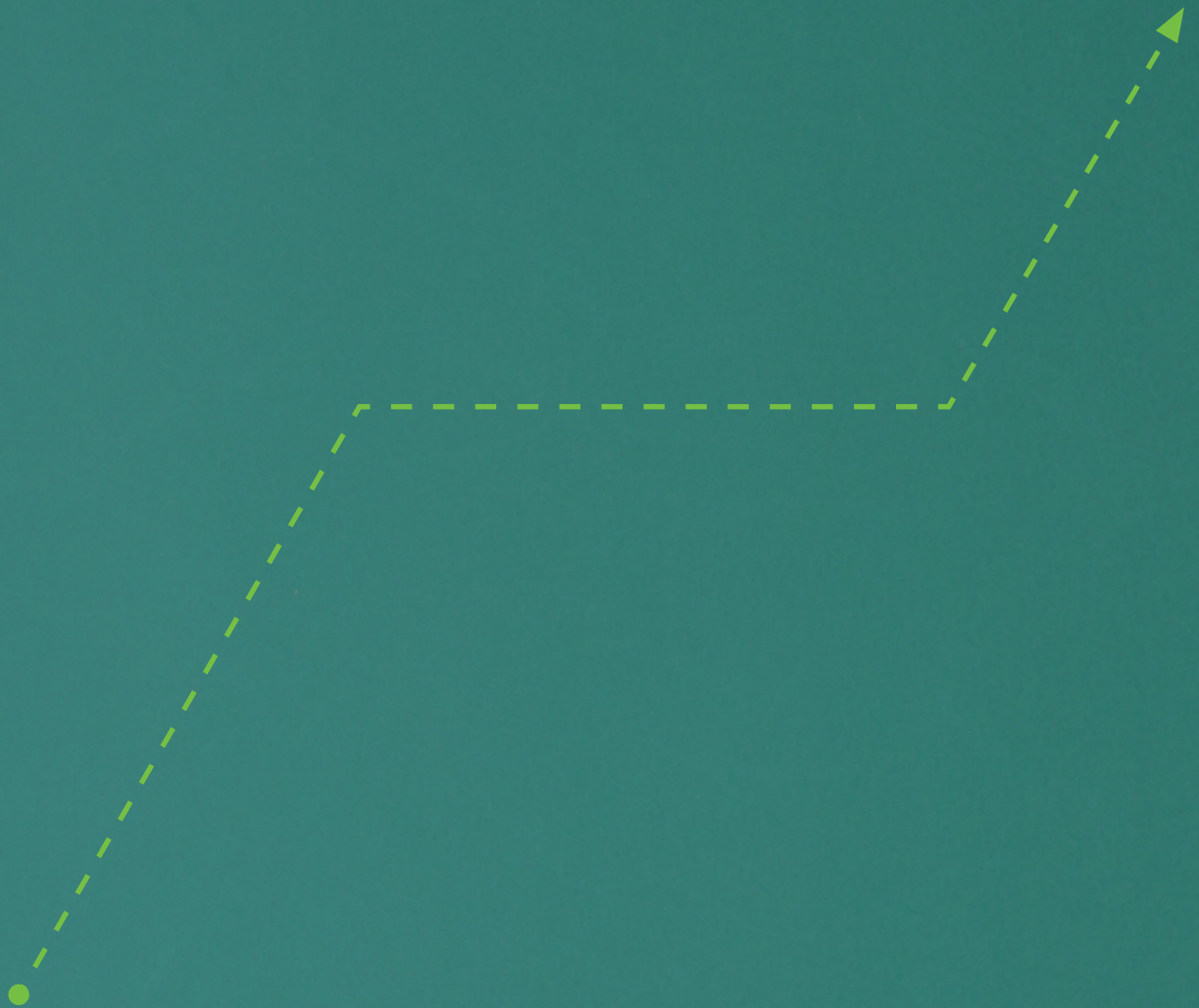
**4. End voluntary contributions** – Increase the capitation grant to reduce reliance of schools on voluntary contributions.

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# About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960s, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support. Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction. Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.



# Barnardos

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