

The cost of a free education



For many years there has been a widespread concern about the costs faced by parents when sending their children to school. This briefing highlights these concerns, draws attention to a range of studies and presents a number of recommendations.¹

Every child in England has the right to a free state education. School has the potential to provide all children with opportunities to learn, make friends and participate in activities regardless of family income. At this key point intervention is possible to shield children from the effects of living in poverty – but when families are asked for money to pay for uniforms, activities, school trips and classroom materials, meeting these costs may cause hardship. All children should be able to participate fully in school life, but not having the money to buy the correct uniform, participate in extra-curricular activities or go on school trips may leave them unable to fulfil their full potential, mark them out as being 'poor', and lead to them becoming isolated within school.

The Government is committed to eradicating child poverty and promoting inclusion in schools. Yet increasing insistence on the importance of a distinctive uniform to promote school identity, and on school trips to provide children with experiences outside a classroom has the potential to exclude pupils from low-income families if not handled sensitively. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance on uniform policy states that cost considerations should always be taken into account when policies are set. However practice varies from school to school and there is little monitoring of schools' adherence to this. Similarly, although schools can only legally ask for 'voluntary contributions' to cover the costs of trips that take place in school time, many parents report that they feel pressurised into paying for these, and that if they cannot find the money their child will not be allowed to participate.

In 2003 the Government commissioned research to get a comprehensive picture of the costs facing parents. The DfES research suggests that parents of secondary school pupils spend an average of **£948.11** per year on their child's 'free' education while the average cost of sending a pupil to a state primary school is **£563.15**². Fig.1 shows the average annual spend on meals, clothing, trips and other equipment required for a pupil in secondary school. Parents are also asked to contribute towards classroom materials, music lessons and charity events.

Fig. 1

	Primary	Secondary
Uniform	£135.15	£183.33
PE kit	£44.67	£109.76
Day trips	£8.32	£19.38
Residential trips	£119.60	£186.72

It is unsurprising that many families will struggle to meet these costs. The DfES survey showed that 55 per cent of respondents in the two lowest income groups found them difficult to meet. Seventeen per cent of families with children live on less than £200 a week – for these children expensive uniforms and school trips may be simply unaffordable³.

For families who face difficulties meeting these costs, there are a variety of consequences. According to One Parent Families 23 per cent of lone parent members say that seeing their children miss out on school and social activities is one of the things they like least about money being tight, and Citizens Advice Bureaux have reported that clients are forced to borrow money to pay for uniforms – pushing families who are already in challenging circumstances into debt.⁴

A woman receiving help with debt problems from a CAB had to buy new uniform for two of her sons. She was also worried that the cost of allowing them to join the football team and learn musical instruments would add to her debts.

Socially, children who cannot afford all the associated costs of school may find themselves isolated, stigmatised and more likely to be bullied. They may also suffer academically if they cannot go on school trips, or cannot afford textbooks or lesson materials. Research with children has found that living without the essentials required for school can seriously jeopardise their well-being:

“Children’s accounts of their school lives indicated that they were experiencing considerable disadvantage within their schools, with many reporting feeling bullied, isolated and left out at critical stages of their academic careers.”⁵

Local authorities have discretionary powers to provide grants to low income families who may struggle to buy school uniform, yet access to this assistance remains an unacceptable ‘postcode lottery’. A Citizens Advice survey found that in 2004, 42 per cent of authorities did not offer any kind of grant for school uniform, with five per cent offering them to families in ‘exceptional circumstances’ only. The grants available vary hugely in size and scope – but most would not cover the cost of uniform for a year. In 2004, the average amount available for a pupil transferring from primary to secondary school was £51.47 – not nearly enough to meet the average costs (Citizens Advice 2004).

Practical tips for schools, by schools

Uniform

- School clothing should be kept simple, and be available from more than one outlet. If branding is required, it is cheaper if badges can be sewn on to plain clothing that is machine washable.
- Schools can work together to reduce the cost to parents. For example, if a primary school uniform is the same colour as that of the secondary it feeds, clothing can be carried over from one school to another.
- A second hand clothing outlet in the school or local community allows parents to buy cheaper uniform – encouraging pupils and parents to donate uniform when it is no longer needed. Emphasising the 'recycling' aspect of such a scheme will make it less stigmatising for parents buying cheaper clothing.
- Parents should be provided with as much information as possible about the help available to them.
- Uniform should not be changed unnecessarily, and parents should be given advance notice to help them spread the cost.

"My local authority does not give uniform grants, and with a new school year ahead I am struggling to keep up. As a parent I have to sign a form every year agreeing to the dress code. What happens if I cannot afford the clothes asked for?"

Caller to the One Parent Families information line.

A family of seven were struggling to manage on a very low income. After bills were paid, the family were left with £140 per week for food and housekeeping: £2.85 per person per day. The family were struggling to provide uniforms for the new school term and the children ran a very high risk of being bullied. FWA awarded a grant towards the cost of the school uniforms.

School trips

- Consider whether your trips offer the best value for money. Are there cheaper, more local alternatives that would meet your educational objectives?
- If you ask for voluntary contributions, consider how to ensure that parents who cannot afford this are not identified, stigmatised or excluded.
- Giving parents a schedule in September of all the trips planned in that year, along with the expected cost, will allow parents to plan ahead.
- Let parents know which trips are essential for the curriculum and which are recreational, and allow them to choose the ones they feel are the most important.

Charity events

- Are non-uniform days the best way to raise money for charity? These can put pressure on many low income families, due to the need to make a contribution and the pressure to wear fashionable clothes.

Any other tips? Send them to school.costs@citizensadvice.org.uk

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¹ School Meals: Recipe for change: a good practice guide to school meals, CPAG 2004; School's out – no free meals, Barnardos 2004
School Uniform: Help with School Uniform costs: Update, Citizens Advice 2004; Grants for school uniforms: Evidence from the FWA, 2002

² The Cost of Schooling, DfES, 2004

³ General Household Survey, National Statistics, 2004

⁴ Membership survey, One Parent Families, 2004

⁵ Ridge T, 'Listening to children: developing a child centred approach to childhood poverty in the UK', Family Matters No. 65, 2003

⁶ The Bedford Charity, Bedfordshire and Luton Education Business Partnership, CPAG Bedfordshire, Bedford and District CAB, Bedford Credit Union, Bedfordshire County Council, Bedfordshire Children's Fund, and Hastingsbury Upper School.