



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

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# SCHOOL COSTS

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Submission to the Committee on Education and Skills

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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POLICY TEAM

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## SVP perspective of supporting families with school costs

As the largest charity of social concern operating in Ireland, the Society of St Vincent de Paul has a deep interest in education. We welcome this opportunity to contribute our insights via this consultation process. We see access to education as a critical enabler out of social exclusion and poverty. In 2016 SVP spent €3.7 million on education helping people in various situations and at different stages of the life cycle to access education and training to improve their life chances.

SVP members engage in a variety of initiatives and projects all over the country to encourage and support both families and individuals to access education. Through a variety of mechanisms, the Social Justice and Policy team in SVP gains knowledge, information and data about how the 927 visitation Conferences in the Republic of Ireland interact with and support families struggling to afford the back to school and year-long participation costs of education. We see the anxiety of parents trying to juggle their low incomes to meet the myriad demands during the school year for events, curricular based sport and music costs, exam fees, trips, fund raising ventures and equipment. This is simply too much to bear for many families on low incomes on top of the substantial amounts incurred at the start of each school year for school books, uniforms, digital devices and 'voluntary' contributions. They turn to SVP for financial as well as emotional support in these times.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice estimate that the cost of education for a primary school student is €349 per year and for a secondary student this increases to €849. This is excluding the estimated cost of €260 for a computer which brings the total cost to €1,458 for the year.<sup>1</sup> According to the 2016 EU SILC survey, 61% of respondents in Ireland said they had difficulty meeting education costs at all levels, significantly above the EU average of 40%. This figure rises to 84% for households living below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup>

In July 2018 SVP carried out a school costs survey among Conferences (closing date August 2018). Preliminary findings highlight that school books and school uniforms are the two items SVP receive most requests for with the average spend of €100-€150 paid out by Conferences to families. While the sample is small, (116 Conferences assisting on average 20 families per year with school costs have responded to date to the survey), it does create an indicative snapshot of the burden of school costs on families.

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence from VPSJ May 2018

<sup>2</sup> Source Eurostat: [ilc\_at07] <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

In June 2018 SVP East region (covering counties Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow) have received 326 calls relating to back to school costs. That figure rises to 449 up until mid -July 2018. August would be considered their busiest month. Many parents have stated that their child's school have requested a registration fee in June for the next school term. Worryingly, SVP information support officers have reported many families are awaiting approval or need to re-apply for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA). Therefore, they will not get this payment before their children return to school.

SVP have put forward, in our Pre-Budget Submission '*Paving a Pathway out of Poverty*<sup>3</sup>, recommendations which would address the worry and financial stress of parents. They would also ensure children and young people can enjoy and experience school life equal to their more advantaged peers.

***In August 2017 SVP received a record number of calls as 5,000 families sought help with back to school costs.***

## Capitation Levels & Voluntary Contributions in Primary & Post Primary Schools

Despite Ireland having the youngest population in Europe, with 28.2% of the population aged 0-19, Ireland spends relatively limited amounts on education.<sup>4</sup> Ireland's total expenditure on education is 11.1% which is just above the EU average of 10.2% but this fact does not take in to account our young population. Ireland is unique in that it has a growing young population as well as a growing older population which many EU countries have. CSO statistics from 2016 show that Ireland had the highest number of 0-14-year olds in the EU.<sup>5</sup> While expenditure on education has increased from 2013-2016, this was largely consumed by the growth in student numbers.<sup>6</sup> This has meant schools have continued to experience funding shortfalls and have had to rely on parent's 'voluntary' contributions to meet day-to-day running costs. An underinvestment in public education, contributes to higher education costs for parents. While many SVP Conferences do not give financial assistance towards 'voluntary' contributions, they would instead give food vouchers which allows parents use that money which was for the weekly food bill go towards 'voluntary' contributions. SVP

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.svp.ie/news-media/news/svp-pre-budget-submission-2019.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/policy-issue-article/4553/2016-09-16nsmeducation2pager.pdf> Social Justice Ireland National Social Monitor 2016 Education

<sup>5</sup> Measuring Ireland's Progress <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mip/mip2015/introduction/>

<sup>6</sup> ASTIR Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland Volume 36: Number 2: March 2018

have received calls in June and July from parents who have stated schools are combining the payment for the book rental scheme with a 'voluntary' contribution. This lack of transparency is a very worrying development and at the very least does not contribute to families viewing education in a positive light. SVP members have also highlighted that some schools have refused pupils school workbooks until parents pay the contribution towards the school. One parent who contacted SVP for the first time was extremely upset to receive reminder text messages from her child's school concerning a 'voluntary' contribution. She described how this was so traumatic for her as she regularly receives phone calls from her bank as she is in mortgage arrears. Payment requests from schools vary from €65 per year up to €220.00.<sup>7</sup>

***'Voluntary' Contributions- 'We ask the people concerned to work with the school- in some cases, the schools do allow for staggered contributions but not all schools in the area support this'. (SVP Member)***

***'One Parent family, four children, on social welfare. Child Starting 1<sup>st</sup> year. I-pad €700 and registration fee €250. 'Voluntary' fees for two other children at €180.00 each. Books primary school €70.00. There is also the cost of uniforms and shoes'. (SVP Member)***

Following a commitment in the Action Plan for Education 2017, the Department of Education and Skills introduced a school circular aimed at reducing the cost of education to parents. Schools who complied with the circular could avail of additional funding via a premium school capitation fund. However, in March 2018, the Department of Education and Skills confirmed that they were not actively monitoring compliance with the circular and no school has been awarded additional funding.<sup>8</sup> It should not be up to schools to manage these costs saving measures. The Department of Education and Skills needs to adequately resource our schools to ensure pupils achieve their educational potential. Budget 2017 & 2018 failed to deliver on the commitment to restore core capitation rates to 2010 levels following a 15% cut (€200 per student in 2009 to €170 in 2016).<sup>9</sup> SVP is asking the Department to carry out an assessment of the adequacy of the capitation rates and incrementally increase funding to schools so that all children have access to quality, free primary and secondary education.

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<sup>7</sup> Correspondence from SVP Information Support Officer East Region 25 July 2018

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.parliamentary-questions.com/question/9933-18/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2016-11-10/158/?highlight%5B0%5D=capitation&highlight%5B1%5D=rate&highlight%5B2%5D=capitation>

## School Books

A child's ability to benefit from all the educational opportunities on offer is obviously affected by their household income. Recent correspondence from the VPSJ highlight that school books for primary school pupil cost on average €190.32 and €310.44 for a secondary school pupil. This is a 2.1% increase in the cost of school books and stationary costs since MESL 2017.<sup>10</sup>

In 2013, the JOC on Education and Social Protection recommended that a 'five year' template for the delivery of an entirely free schoolbook system, based on the UK model, should be produced and the practice of using workbooks should be discontinued in all schools.

## School Uniforms

Research from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice have shown there is a 3.0% decrease in the cost of clothing. This has resulted in a decrease in the cost of school uniforms, but this is offset by an increase of 2.1% in school books and stationary costs and an increase of 1.6% in other educational related costs (photocopying, materials fees, 'voluntary' contributions).<sup>11</sup> The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is currently €125 for a child in primary school and €250 for a child in secondary school. This is a means tested targeted social welfare payment to support parents with the cost of purchasing uniforms and school footwear, however, many families SVP visit, and support are just a few euro over the threshold and do not therefore qualify. A more fairer approach would be to introduce tapering eligibility for this payment and to equalise income thresholds for one and two-parent families.

Uniform costs continue to be a source of stress and frustration for parents. There is a strong call from parents to have a uniform in school but that it should be cost effective preferably plain uniforms (or) with iron-on crests.<sup>12</sup> Some schools have embraced this cost-effective measure, however, many schools particularly at secondary schools require school specific uniforms. The cost of a school specific uniform in a secondary school costs parents on average €200 and €95 at primary level.<sup>13</sup> Costs for school shoes for a fourth-class pupil are approximately €45, this increase to approximately €70 for a first-year pupil.<sup>14</sup>

There is a common theme throughout the school system when we consult SVP members on the issue of school resources. Many schools make a great effort to keep costs down for parents by

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<sup>10</sup> Correspondence from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice May 2018

<sup>11</sup> Correspondence from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/pdf/School-Costs-Survey-2017-Briefing-Paper.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

introducing non-branded uniforms, a ban on school workbooks etc. However, with little direction from the Department of Education and Skills<sup>15</sup>, some schools do not always see this as their job, as a result parents are forced to pay higher prices for their child to attend school while others do not. There is an inequity in this and parents on lower incomes are affected the most due to their limited income.

## Transition Year Programme

Transition Year costs are often cited by SVP members as a major source of financial stress for disadvantaged families due to the specific and additional programme costs, fees, trips, equipment for various projects and other sundry costs which struggling parents simply cannot afford. This inability to afford the ongoing costs creates a negative and stressed atmosphere which stifles opportunities for development and experimentation, at the very important developmental stage of adolescence. A study of the transition year programme in 2013 shows almost 25 years on from its introduction, better off students are up to twice as likely to have the opportunity to do the post junior cert programme. This study raises questions about equity in education because transition year students do better in the leaving cert, while it is also seen as important for social and personal development.<sup>16</sup>

It is estimated that completing transition year in post primary school can cost on average between €300 and €900 per pupil.<sup>17</sup> The following responses from the survey would be indicative of what SVP members experiences are, regarding the transition year programme:

***Low income families are going to moneylenders to fund school trips rather than tell their child they can't afford to pay. (SVP Member).***

***We have a family of nine, two parents and seven children. Three in secondary school, one in Transition Year. This young person missed out on four outings due to a lack of money and only got to go on the fifth as our Conference assisted. The father is unemployed, and the mother works in the childcare sector. (SVP Member).***

***We know one mother in extreme financial difficulty who went to a post primary school with €200 (out of the combined weekly Social Welfare payment of €360 for herself, her husband and her daughter) towards her daughter's trip which cost €640. (SVP Member).***

## School Transport Costs

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.parliamentary-questions.com/question/9933-18/>

<sup>16</sup> Clerkin A. (2013) Growth of the 'Transition Year' programme nationally and in Schools serving disadvantaged students 1992-2011 <http://www.erc.ie/programme-of-work/transition-year-survey/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Transition-Year-Exploring-the-Student-Experience.pdf>

School transport costs adversely affect those living in rural areas as the costs to avail of the scheme remain significant for low income families. To qualify for such support, primary school children must be residing more than 3.2km from and attending their nearest school. The distance in respect of post primary students is 4.8km.<sup>18</sup> Charges for eligible children in primary school currently stand at €100 per family with a family maximum of €220 for primary school pupils if an eligible child does not hold a medical card. The annual charge for post primary school transport increased to €350 per pupil subject to a maximum of €650 per family.<sup>19</sup> SVP members are also supporting families with school transport costs who are living in urban areas. This is because children who are experiencing homelessness have had to move away from their community to access emergency accommodation. This causes huge emotional stress as well as financial hardship on families who can least afford additional costs while experiencing homelessness.

SVP recommends extending the medical card waiver to students eligible for concessionary school transport. This is estimated to cost €2 million and would go some way in alleviating child poverty.

## Digital Media in Schools

The use of digital devices in schools have increased in recent years. This is to be welcomed as we continue to live in a world where using digital devices is essential for everyday daily tasks and duties. Some schools provide I-pads for students with an initial charge at the beginning of the year to rent the device. However, SVP are very aware of schools who require a child to buy their own device. This cost can range from €200 up to €750. A pupil needs this device at the beginning of the year if they are to participate fully in the school curriculum. The Department of Education and Skills published the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 in 2017, however, there is no consideration in the plan for the fact that digital school books are liable to 23% VAT in comparison to VAT exemption on printed school books.<sup>20</sup>

## Delivering Free, Inclusive, Primary & Secondary Education:

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<sup>18</sup> Department of Education and Skills, Primary School Transport Scheme, p. 1 and the Department's website <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Management-Organisation/School-Transport.html>

<sup>19</sup> [www.sinnfein.ie/files/School\\_Transport\\_doc\\_pdf](http://www.sinnfein.ie/files/School_Transport_doc_pdf)

<sup>20</sup> [www.Barnardos.ie](http://www.Barnardos.ie) Barnardos School Costs Survey 2017 Briefing Paper

**Recommendations:**

End the 'voluntary' contribution system in non-fee paying primary and secondary schools. Commission an independent assessment on the adequacy of the capitation rates and incrementally increase funding so that all schools have sufficient funds to cover running costs. Begin by delivering on the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 commitment of restoring capitation rates to 2010 levels. Estimated cost of restoring capitation rates: €35 million. Allocate an additional €20 million for classroom resources.

Increase funding for the School Book Rental Scheme by €15 million and implement the recommendation from the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (2013) to introduce a five-year template for the delivery of an entirely free school book scheme. Estimated Cost: €40 million.

Restore the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to the 2011 level of €305 for children over 12 years, and to €200 for children under 12 years. Equalise income thresholds for one and two-parent families. Introduce tapering to the BSCFA payment. Estimated cost to restore BSCFA: €18 million.

Make child benefit payable to families with children over the age of 18 who are enrolled in secondary school, reflecting the higher educational costs for families with adolescents. Estimated cost: €62 million

All children who hold a medical card should be eligible for the scheme and not have to pay €100 contribution irrespective of their distance from school. Estimated cost: €2 million

Conduct an assessment on the cost of Transition Year. Develop new guidelines which include a commitment to making participation in the year available to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background or other potential barriers. Provide additional funding to promote the participation of students from disadvantaged and low- income families.

The Department of Education and Skills to address the anomaly whereby digital school books are liable to 23% VAT and School Books have a VAT exemption.

**Concluding Remarks**

The insights and recommendations given in this consultation are grounded in the experiences of SVP members' who work with families experiencing educational disadvantage. School costs not only place additional financial strain on low income parents, they also prohibit the full participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in education. Under-achievement in school can have profound consequences for children and adults in later life, not only in terms of economic uncertainty, but also in terms of well-being, health, self-esteem and participation in family and community life. Intervening in this cycle of deprivation demands that a systematic, integrated and effective strategy is put in place to address educational disadvantage. For the purposes of this consultation, SVP contends that non-fee paying primary and secondary schools need to be adequately resourced and sufficient investment allocated to schools which would ensure all children and young people can participate on a level playing field with their peers in the education system.