

The role of voluntary contributions in post-primary schools in Ireland

St. Vincent de Paul

2023



Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	3
Summary of Key Findings	5
Parents Survey	9
Schools Survey	27
School Case Studies	30
Appendix	42

Introduction

Introduction

The Irish educational system is, in principle, free of charge at the point of delivery; there are, however, many hidden costs associated with sending a child to post-primary. The voluntary contribution (VC), fixed charges and lack of provision of required materials such as classroom resources and equipment can have a serious impact on a young person's ability to attend and thrive at school.

Many schools seek voluntary contributions to cover essential costs that are not met by funding received by the Department of Education. In 2010 the standard capitation grant was €345 per pupil. By 2016 that had reduced to €296 per pupil. While there has been some increase since 2019, the current grant of €316 per pupil is still lower than it was 12 years ago (€328 in 2011).

Voluntary contributions are sometimes referred to as some variation of administration fees, school fees, student support fund or school development fees. In some cases both a voluntary contribution and additional fees are requested. The amount sought from parents tends to vary across different school types, sizes and locations.

Saint Vincent de Paul (SVP) Ireland has been a vocal advocate for ending voluntary contribution charges, and all other financial requests of parents in non-fee paying schools, and for restoring capitation grants to 2010 levels. Assisting families with education costs is an important focus for SVP, which has experienced several years of increases in requests for financial assistance with education-related costs. This support plays a role in supporting lower-income households access education, which is a key route out of poverty. Providing assistance with education costs has been the primary driver of SVP's expenditure growth in recent years.

Children accounted for more than 20.5% of the Irish population in 2019 which is the highest share among the EU Member States. Despite having the youngest population in Europe, Ireland spends 5.6% of GNI* (Modified Gross National Income) on education, only marginally more than the European Union average of 5% of GDP.¹

This report was commissioned in response to a perceived gap in the Government's investment in the education system in recent years, which has led to an increased reliance by schools on voluntary contributions, grants and donations. It aims to assess the role of voluntary contributions, other school charges, and the adequacy of funding provided to schools by the Department of Education and Skills. The research objectives for this report include:

- Establishing the role of school charges in post-primary education.
- Examining how gaps in funding are addressed through voluntary contributions, other charges and fundraising.
- Providing an evidence base to inform the development of recommendations on actions that both schools and the Department can take to improve the sustainability of post-primary education.

¹ GNI* is used instead of GDP for Ireland, as Irish GDP is distorted by multinational companies locating intellectual property assets here. GNI*, or Modified Gross National Income, attempts to correct for this.

Introduction

Approach

The initial motivation for the report arose out of a concern that there may be deficits between the grants provided to secondary schools and their day-to-day operating costs, leading to a reliance on voluntary contributions and charges to fund vital school resources and activities.

Anecdotal evidence, and SVP's own work with struggling households, has highlighted the pressures families face in paying what is ostensibly a voluntary contribution to post-primary schools.

Grant Thornton was engaged by SVP to review the role of voluntary contributions and school charges in a sample of secondary schools in Ireland. Grant Thornton engaged with the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) for Voluntary Secondary Schools, and Education and Training Board (ETB) management boards to gain stakeholder buy-in across post-primary schools and to raise awareness of the research project.

To ensure a sufficient evidence base for the report, three different information gathering exercises were employed:

- An online survey of parents
- A survey of post-primary schools
- One-to-one interviews with school principals

There were 1,477 responses to the parents' survey, nineteen responses to the schools' survey, and one-to-one interviews were carried out with the principals of six representative schools.

School Types

In Ireland, the education system offers various types of post-primary schools, giving parents a degree of choice. These options are detailed below.

Voluntary secondary schools

Voluntary secondary schools are privately owned and managed under the trusteeship of religious communities, boards of governors or individuals. Voluntary secondary schools represent approximately 50% of the total number of post-primary schools, making it the largest cohort of schools in Ireland.

Vocational schools and community colleges

Vocational schools and community colleges are owned by Education and Training Boards. The boards of management for these schools are sub-committees of the ETBs.

Membership of the boards include ETB representatives and parent, teacher and community representatives. Vocational schools and community colleges are largely funded by the Department of Education. There are currently 252 Community Colleges under the patronage of ETBs.

Community and comprehensive schools

Many community and comprehensive schools are the result of the amalgamation of voluntary secondary and vocational schools. These schools are fully financed by the Department of Education. There are 97 Community and Comprehensive Post-Primary Schools across Ireland. It was not possible to arrange consultations with these schools through the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS).

DEIS Schools

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) was launched by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005. This designation is intended to address the educational needs of pupils from disadvantaged communities. There are 194 post-primary schools with this designation in the Irish education system.

Summary of Key Findings



Summary of Key Findings

Despite varying response rates, the results of the two surveys did identify certain areas as being worthy of further examination, helping to shape the initial list of questions to be discussed in the consultations with school principals.

When examining the findings of the three research work-streams together, certain common, or mutually reinforcing, themes did arise which captured the main concerns of schools and parents. These themes are set out below.

Schools’ reliance on voluntary contributions and other charges

The feedback received from both schools and parents suggests that the funding received from the Department of Education is insufficient for providing basic services required for learning such as photocopying, assessment fees, exam papers, classroom resources, and lockers. While schools are allowed to charge fees for these resources, and some schools do charge such fees, their mandatory nature may result in a denial of service to families who are not in a position to pay.

The feedback also highlights that despite the recent increase in the capitation grant, schools are still struggling to fund resource-intensive subjects. Consultees reported that costs for practical subjects such as woodworking and engineering have increased by 60% while food inflation has affected home economics classes. This is occurring at a time when schools are also facing significant uncertainty and concern over energy prices, which are placing a significant strain on their resources.

Impact of Requests for VC on Parents and Students

It may be thought that having “voluntary contributions”, might mitigate the risk of pupils being denied access to certain resources or services, as households who are not in a position to pay could theoretically opt out of this charge, with higher-income households making up the difference. However, the responses to the parent’s survey clearly show that these contributions are not generally communicated as being optional, that they place a significant amount of stress on some families, and that many of the respondents made sacrifices in other areas in order to pay the voluntary contribution asked by the school.

The voluntary contribution is used to pay for school trips, lockers, after-school study, career services, subscriptions, sport and other extracurricular activities. Parents reported a fear that non-payment would result in their child being stigmatised in front of their peers or denied access to lockers or extra-curricular activities.

These charges were reported by parents as being as high as €500 per child. 86% of respondents reported that the post-primary school which their child attends requests a voluntary contribution. However, it should be noted that parents who are asked to pay a voluntary contribution, and in particular a relatively high contribution, would be more likely to complete the survey, and so the results may not be representative of schools as a whole.

Responses received from parents were overwhelmingly negative when asked how well schools explained how voluntary contributions are being spent, and how well they try to keep contributions to a minimum. This suggests that improvements need to be made in how schools communicate with parents about these charges.

Voluntary contribution charged	Number of responses	Percentage of all responses
€0 – €100	654	51%
€101 – €150	288	23%
€151 – €200	120	9%
€201 – €250	108	8%
Greater than €250	101	8%

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Summary of Key Findings

DEIS schools

The report found that voluntary contribution rates, as reported by parents, were lower in DEIS schools compared to non-DEIS schools for all categories except one, in which they were equal.

Pupils in DEIS schools, which are schools located in disadvantaged communities, are at the greatest risk of educational disadvantage, and the DEIS program aims to address this. However, the report highlights that the importance of voluntary contributions for funding school resources and extracurricular activities risks depriving these pupils of these services.

This disparity in voluntary contributions may mean that the development of students attending DEIS schools is being disproportionately negatively impacted, due to a lack of equality in educational experiences and opportunities. This can lead to a perpetuation of educational inequality and negatively impact the long-term prospects of students from DEIS schools.

Rural vs Urban schools

The report found that across all school categories and sizes, voluntary contributions were found to be significantly higher in urban areas, in particular within the Dublin region.

This is likely due to the higher costs associated with living in these areas. Urban areas tend to have a higher cost of living, which can include higher costs for housing, transportation, and other expenses.

High school charges can, therefore, be a significant burden for families living in urban areas, and may create a barrier to education for students from low-income families that are already struggling to make ends meet.

Schools may also face higher costs, as they likely have to pay more for services such as maintenance or cleaning, putting pressure on school budgets. This can make it harder for schools to provide resources and opportunities for their students.

Extracurricular activities

Post-primary schools would not be able to provide extracurricular activities in any meaningful way without the voluntary contribution or similar charges. The heavy reliance on funds raised by the schools themselves creates a risk that disadvantaged communities may not have access to the same level of opportunities for sport and development outside of core school hours. This can lead to a lack of equality in educational experiences and opportunities for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Extracurricular activities play an important role in the overall education and development of students. They help to develop social and emotional skills, teamwork, and leadership skills. They also provide opportunities for physical activity and health promotion.

The need for schools to rely on voluntary contributions or similar charges to fund extracurricular activities can create a significant barrier for students from low-income families. These families may not be able to afford to pay the contributions, which can limit their children's access to extracurricular activities and opportunities for personal and social development.

Capitation Grant

The Capitation Grant, which is a grant paid to schools based on the number of recognised pupils enrolled in the previous school academic year, was found to create a funding shortfall for the first period of the next academic year. This is because the grant is not adjusted to reflect the actual number of students enrolled in the current academic year until April, when a review takes place and funding is increased accordingly. This creates a challenge for schools when it comes to budget planning, as they are not able to accurately predict how much funding they will receive until several months into the school year.

Additionally, there are a significant number of grants payable to schools, many of which are dependent on school type, and often on historic arrangements. This makes it challenging for policy makers to measure and implement transparency and equality among schools when it comes to funding. This can lead to some schools being less well-funded than others, with negative impacts on educational equality.

Summary of Key Findings

Impacts on families

Many parents reported extreme financial difficulties in trying to pay for their children's education, and specifically cited the expectations to pay the voluntary contribution charges. They shared stories of how they were struggling to make ends meet and how these struggles were compounded by the perceived necessity of paying the voluntary contribution charges.

These difficulties can lead to parents having to make difficult choices between paying for their children's education and paying for other basic necessities such as food and housing. Parents reported experiencing food poverty, taking on new debts, and even forgoing paying bills in order to afford their children's education.

The report includes a sample of these stories, but it is important to note that these are just a small representation of the many reports of financial hardships that parents are facing and of the significant burden education-related costs impose on families.

Furthermore, it can have a negative impact on the children themselves, as they may not be able to participate fully in school activities or may not have access to necessary resources if their parents are unable to pay the voluntary contributions.

Additionally, not being able to afford the voluntary contributions can create a sense of shame and guilt for parents, as they may feel like they are not providing enough for their children. This can also lead to children being stigmatized and facing discrimination at school if they are not able to participate in certain activities or access certain resources.

In addition to specific questions about the impact of voluntary charges, there was an option for parents to submit comments on any topic they wished to. 1,085 respondents availed of this option, and their comments were examined and categorised into themes. The table below displays the six most commonly cited themes.

Major themes raised by parents in optional comments	Number of comments referencing theme
General difficulty paying the VC or other charges	677
Causing reduced spending on groceries, family activities, discretionary spending	164
Impacting ability to pay, or causing non-payment of bills	109
Not communicated as optional	56
Positive or neutral view on VCs and other charges	42
Examples provided of goods or facilities being withheld from pupils due to non-payment	38

Parents Survey



Parents Survey

Introduction

A survey was issued to gather information on how prevalent voluntary contributions and other charges are, the levels of contribution asked for, and its impact on family finances. A key objective of the survey was to examine whether the substantial anecdotal evidence describing significant costs imposed on families could be placed in a more broadly-based and representative context.

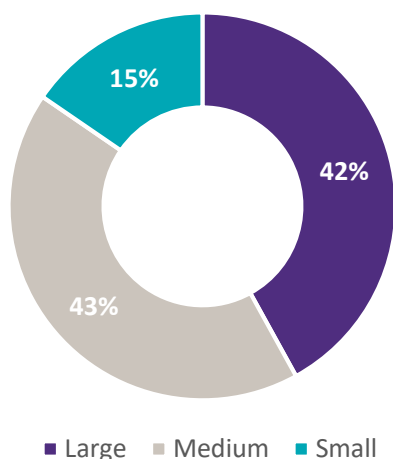
There was considerable success in this regard, as the survey achieved 1,477 responses. Given the impact of the Covid public health crisis and the recent cost of living pressures, the urgency for these challenges to be acknowledged and acted upon by the government has become greater.

Our analysis of respondents to the parents survey found that the survey was successful in reaching a broad cross-section of Irish society, with the sample representing practically geographic areas of Ireland and across various post-primary school types.

An important element of the survey was to also capture how the application of the “voluntary contribution” differs between schools of different sizes:

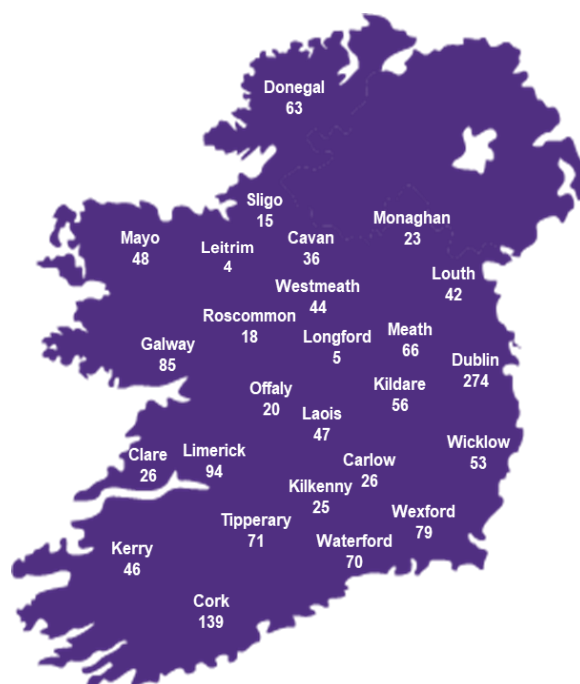
- 15% of respondents had children attending a small school, defined as a school with less than 450 pupils;
- 43% of respondents had children attending a medium sized school, defined as having between 450 and 700 pupils; and
- 42% of respondents had children attending a large school, defined as having more than 750 students.

Distribution of School Sizes



County	Responses	County	Responses
Dublin	274	Kerry	46
Cork	139	Westmeath	44
Limerick	94	Louth	42
Galway	85	Cavan	36
Wexford	79	Carlow	26
Tipperary	71	Clare	26
Waterford	70	Kilkenny	25
Meath	66	Monaghan	23
Donegal	63	Offaly	20
Kildare	56	Roscommon	18
Wicklow	53	Sligo	15
Mayo	48	Longford	5
Laois	47	Leitrim	4

Geographic Breakdown of Respondents



Parents Survey

Profile of respondents

Profile of schools

Of the 1,477 parents that responded to the survey 32% had children in voluntary post-primary, 13% Education and Training Board school and 54% from Community and Comprehensive

The survey also sought to capture any differences that may exist between rural and urban post-primary schools.

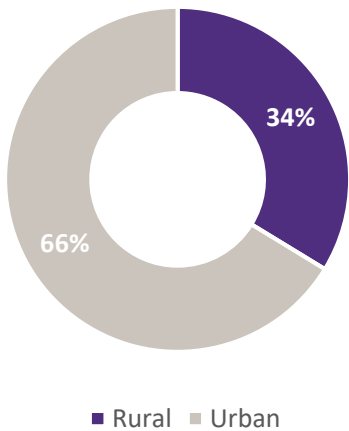
- 66% of respondents had children in urban schools and 34% in rural schools

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, was launched by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005.

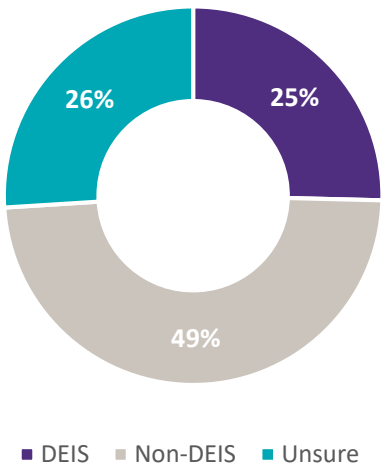
The plan focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities and schools receive additional funding to achieve this.

- 25% of respondents had children in a DEIS school, 49% were from Non-DEIS schools;
- 26% stated they were unsure of the status of their child's school.

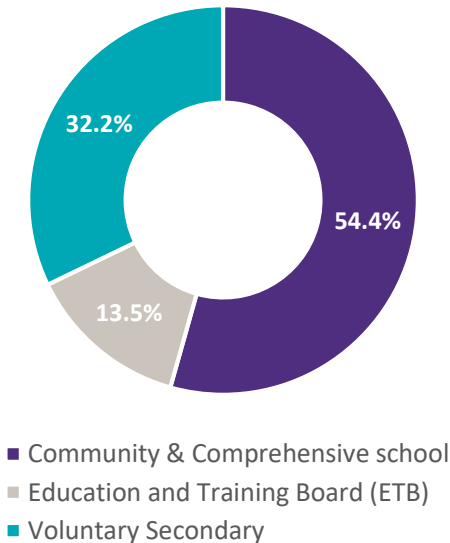
Rural vs Urban



DEIS Status



School Type



Parents Survey

Voluntary Contributions

Voluntary Contributions

Of the 1,477 parents that responded to the survey, 1,271, or 86%, stated that their child’s school requested a voluntary contribution. Where a voluntary contribution was requested, over 1,000 respondents (79%) felt that the optional status of the VC was not clearly communicated.

The survey also examined how parents felt about the operations of voluntary contribution schemes – how transparent the school is about how it uses funds collected under such schemes, and how much of an effort they feel their child’s school is making to minimise the contribution asked for.

VC Requested?		
No	206	14%
Yes	1,271	86%
Total	1,477	100%

Optional Status Communicated		
No	1,005	79%
Yes	266	21%
Total	1,271	100%

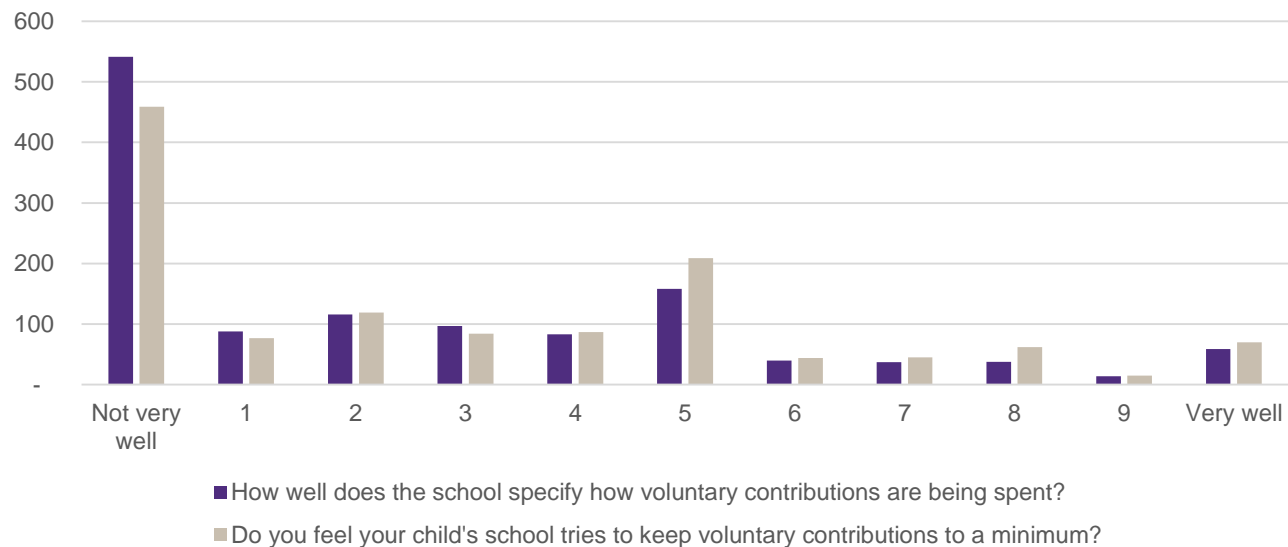
Median VC Requested	
Urban	120
Rural	100
DEIS	100
Non-DEIS	120
All Schools	100

How well does the school specify how voluntary contributions are being spent?

The survey demonstrates that many parents feel there is a lack of transparency in how school funds are used and how the exact voluntary contribution charge is determined. As illustrated in the graph below, the majority of respondents gave the lowest rating to schools on how the voluntary contribution funds are being used.

Do you feel your child's school tries to keep voluntary contributions to a minimum?

There was similar negative sentiment towards the degree to which schools try to keep contributions to a minimum. The lack of awareness of how these important sources of funding are being utilised and the absence of parental input may contribute to the negative view of VCs.



Parents Survey

Key points

86%

Of schools that request a voluntary contribution...

86% of respondents stated that voluntary contributions are requested from their children's school. Across all school types and categories, the voluntary contribution averages €140 per child. The voluntary contribution ranged from a high of €550 to a low of €30 per child.

80%

Presentation of voluntary contribution as being optional...

80% of respondents stated that voluntary contributions were not clearly communicated as being optional.

81%

Incurring additional costs...

81% of survey respondents stated that they incur additional costs, beyond the voluntary contribution, for school activities/clubs.

61%

61% of survey respondents stated that they incur additional costs, beyond the voluntary contribution, for classroom resources, such as photocopying/printing fees and materials.

87%

Cutting back or delaying other payments or activities in order to pay the voluntary contribution...

87% of survey respondents stated that they have had to cut back or delay spending in order to pay for the voluntary contribution. Examples provided including the purchasing of food, medication and social activities.

Parents Survey

Impact of Voluntary Contributions

“How has the voluntary contribution charge impacted on your family finances?”

The parents survey results provided a deeper insight into the financial burden that the voluntary contributions have on families. Many parents highlighted that the charge was an added financial stress and that it put a strain on their already tight budgets.

Some parents even reported that they had to make sacrifices in other areas of their lives in order to pay the charge, such as cutting back on family activities, or reducing their grocery budget.

Some parents reported that the voluntary contributions had a significant impact on their ability to pay bills, with some needing to borrow money from relatives or credit unions, or resorting to using credit cards. In some cases utility bills and insurance renewals were left unpaid to facilitate the payment of the VC and other school charges.

The survey also revealed that the voluntary contributions were not always communicated as optional. This lack of transparency led to some parents feeling pressured into paying or embarrassed as they were not fulfilling their responsibilities as a parent.

Several who found it difficult to pay the charge reported feelings of embarrassment. In some cases this was a direct consequence of actions by the school in highlighting non-payment to the student.

A small number felt that the charge had priority over their healthcare, and prioritised paying the VC over appointments and medication.

Furthermore, the survey revealed that the voluntary contributions were not only impacting on the family's finances, but also on their mental health. Some parents reported feelings of anxiety and stress due to the financial burden of the charge. A small number reported that they needed SVP support to help them to pay the charge.

However, it's worth noting that there were also 40 parents (4% of all comments) who reported having a positive or neutral view of the voluntary contributions, and that they were able to afford it without issues or with careful budgeting.

Overall, the survey results showed that the voluntary contributions have a significant impact on families. Some of the reoccurring themes from the 979 parents that completed the question are detailed in the following pages.

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

“How has the voluntary contribution impacted your family finances?”

Of the 1,477 survey respondents, 1,084 individuals specifically answered a question about how these contributions affected their family's finances. The responses were analysed and 979 were grouped into identifiable themes for further examination.

The particularly strong response rate illustrates the depth of feeling among parents of students attending post-primary schools regarding voluntary contribution charges. However, it is important to note that parents who have strong feelings regarding voluntary contributions may have been more motivated to complete the survey.

Theme from responses	Number of responses
General difficulty paying the VC or other charges	557
Impacting spending on groceries, family activities, discretionary spending	142
Impacting ability to pay, or causing non-payment of bills	96
Not communicated as optional	47
Positive or neutral view on VCs and other charges	40
Examples provided of goods or facilities being withheld from pupils due to non-payment	34
Did not pay the charge	26
Impacts on mental health arising from stress or feeling of pressure	21
Incurred debt, used credit cards or borrowed money from relatives to pay charges	21
Feelings of or concern that embarrassment arising from no payment	10
Affected their ability to seek healthcare or charges took priority for healthcare	8
Sought assistance from SVP to pay school charges	4

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

The financial burden of “free education” in Ireland

Despite the right to education being enshrined in the Irish constitution, parents feel that the significant financial burden of voluntary contributions, which are in addition to costs associated with classroom resources, books and extracurricular activities, have a major impact on family finances.

While the voluntary contribution is meant to be voluntary in nature, the feedback received from parents has found that this is not always the case. Parents indicated that many families are under financial pressure, having to forgo paying for essentials such as food and utility bills in order to pay the charge.

I challenged this payment last year as they were ringing me and sending notes home. I was told it was not voluntary. As a single parent I can barely afford to pay weekly essential bills. This just took two weeks food from my household

Parent

It is such a burden I feel my child will be uncomfortable in school if it's not paid in full prior to Sept start date

Parent

It is an extra burden on top of all the other payments that have to be made to attend school. It has a negative impact on family finances

Parent

I have not been able to pay some bills just so I can make sure my sons and daughter are not singled out in school and embarrassed by a teacher saying their parent hasn't paid the contribution

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

General difficulty paying the VC or other charges

The feedback from the survey highlights the significant difficulty experienced by parents with regards to paying for the voluntary contributions for their child's education. Some respondents states that they were forced to choose between necessities such as heating or food in order to pay for their child's education. In total, 57% of parents stated they had difficulty paying for school fees and expressed concern with the system of voluntary contributions as one of the many hidden expenses of the "free education" system.

Some parents are struggling to pay the contributions in full, and are feeling the pressure of having to pay off these debts over time. many parents are finding it difficult to make ends meet, and are having to make sacrifices in other areas of their lives in order to pay for their child's education.

Respondents stated the costs of uniforms and stationery, and other expenses associated with sending their children back to school, are becoming increasingly difficult to manage. The survey feedback also highlights the mental burden that these expenses are placing on parents, particularly those who are single parents.

Paying the school is €70 plus the €50 voluntary fee. €50 doesn't sound like a lot but after paying for school books uniform etc. it's a lot especially for my self who is on disability allowance and separated and a mortgage, and at this stage with the cost of living riding its going to be a choice of having heating or food the way things are going

Parent

I am a single parent on disability allowance and getting my sons books, uniform, copies etc. was and is a huge struggle so its going to take more weeks of scrimping to gather up the voluntary contribution. My son is going into fifth year and the expense has broke me mentally and financially as it is.

Parent

I am still trying to pay these and they cause huge pressure to finances that are already seriously struggling

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Impacts on spending for basic necessities (including food, clothing and energy), family activities, and discretionary spending

The comments provided relating to the impact of voluntary contributions on families' finances reveal several recurring themes. Firstly, there is a theme of sacrifice and hardship, with 15% of respondents indicating that they have had to forgo basic necessities such as food and heat in order to pay these contributions.

There is also a sense of financial strain and difficulties in making ends meet, with respondents describing cutting back on spending and activities. Additionally, there is a theme of shame and feelings of failure, with respondents indicating that they do not want others to know about their struggles. Overall, the responses paint a picture of families struggling to meet their financial obligations due to the burden of voluntary contributions.

€100 is a big part of our monthly income; it left us the parents with just bread for 3 days we had food for the other children. They were unaware that we didn't have food to eat. I work part time; my husband is full time but very little left after bills mortgage car insurance and foods is paid for

Parent

We don't eat meals every day with the children we might have a biscuit late with some tea but make them proper dinner. We don't have heat either. But nobody knows. I feel like a failure.

Parent

I am still trying to pay them as I have two other kids in primary and one in college I'm cutting back on after school activities shopping and treats for the kids

Parent

We had to slim back on our shopping and fuel for a couple of weeks

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Impacting ability to pay, or causing non-payment of bills

The financial burden of paying for a child's post-primary education can be significant for many families in Ireland. According to the survey feedback, 10% of respondents stated the financial impact of paying a voluntary contribution or other charges affected their ability to pay bills.

Many parents stated they feel the need to prioritise their child's education over other bills and expenses, and as a result, may leave some bills unpaid in order to be able to afford the voluntary contribution for their child's school.

This can lead to a cycle of debt and financial stress for families. It also highlights the need for more affordable and accessible education options in Ireland, so that parents will not have to choose between their child's education and their own financial well-being.

I have not been able to pay some bills just so I can make sure my sons and daughter are not singled out in school and embarrassed by a teacher saying their parent hasn't paid the contribution

Parent

We skipped paying rent this week so we could pay the 100 euro 'administration' fee

Parent

I have had to cancel my gas and electricity direct debit as I can't afford to pay everything and also send another child to primary school

Parent

I have four children attending 3 different schools so trying to pay all these cost for school has put a serious financial stress on us. I have had to put off some bills which means I am behind by 2 months with some bills; it's a nightmare.

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Not communicated as optional

The voluntary aspect of VCs is not always made clear, with 7% of comments received citing language, policies or communications that did not indicate that the “voluntary contribution” or other terminology used by school charges, were indeed optional.

Parents also noted that students are occasionally disadvantaged if the voluntary contribution charge has not been paid, as illustrated in the quote below where the respondent’s son had their books and diary withheld until the charge was paid.

While this represents a small minority of schools, the issuing of invoices, descriptions of charges as being in arrears and repeated requests for payment can create the impression that these charges are mandatory.

I have suffered stress and extreme anxiety. When I saw the school calling me at work for the money, I was so embarrassed. I was receiving calls every 2 weeks or so; constant pressure for the payment.

Parent

I’ve actually got an overdue bill telling me how much I owe for not paying it. Even when I log onto Vsware, it shows me how much in arrears I am for the voluntary contribution.

Parent

I received 17 text messages during the summer holidays reminding me I hadn’t paid the “Voluntary contribution” yet.

Parent

Worded that, unless paid, child stands to lose their place unless lack of payment explained to, and accepted by, principal.

Parent

Its not voluntary, you must pay €100, along with, €10 for locker, €10 for homework diary, €10 for swipe card and also you pay for ingredients for Home Economics, so it is a stress

Parent

I received a text to say voluntary contribution/book scheme was €190. After receiving my BTSCFA I paid the €190 but received a text before school started asking for the remaining €70. The school had made an error and the cost was €260 and not €190. My son’s books and diary were withheld until the €70 was paid

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Positive or neutral view on VCs and other charges

Forty survey respondents (4%) had a positive or neutral view on voluntary contributions. A common theme among these responses is the understanding of the importance of supporting their child's school financially. They viewed it as a small, manageable expense that they can budget for.

Another theme is the understanding that the voluntary contributions are optional and that parents can pay what they can afford.

Additionally, some of the respondents express the belief that schools do not receive enough funding and that voluntary contributions can help support the school's finances. They also mention that it is a manageable expense and compare it to other known expenses like Christmas. Some comments also stated that it is not a mandatory payment and that parents can pay what they can afford.

Its €40, its not going to break the bank. Electricity costs, grocery shopping is the problem not school fees. It's a small rural school everyone should contribute, join a parents association or the board and you will understand the school finances, which in rural areas are very difficult.

Parent

I don't mind paying them as I think schools don't get enough funding however it is something I consciously budget for.

Parent

I budget for it as a school expense so manageable. It's like Christmas, you know it's coming so budget for it

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Examples of resources or facilities being withheld from pupils due to non-payment

In 44 responses (4%), parents shared that their children can be denied access to book schemes, school diaries and/or lockers for failure to pay the voluntary contribution.

Situations such as this risks disadvantaging pupils and placing families in the position of choosing between household finances and protecting their child from embarrassment.

Can't pay it and my child has had things withheld by the school because of non-payment. We are put under subtle pressure by the teachers, as in they know we haven't paid and so don't talk to us as much as they do others who clearly have.

Parent

I was told if my child didn't pay she wouldn't be insured and she'd be put out of the school

Parent

I'm a single mom to 3 kids. For a week we barely had food as the school withheld my child's books and locker. It was very embarrassing for her. So I had to leave us all hungry to pay the school

Parent

Huge pressure to come up with all the school fees, book cost, uniforms; and if the contributions are not paid by 9th Sept children don't get their school journal or locker. It's like naming and shaming those who don't pay

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Mental health

The inability to pay for voluntary contributions for a child's school can have a significant impact on the mental health of parents. For the child, the inability to pay for voluntary contributions could lead to feelings of exclusion, as they may not be able to participate in certain activities or events at school. This could lead students to feel targeted and isolated from their peers due to their families' economic circumstances. It can lead to feelings of shame and low self-esteem, and have a negative impact on their mental health and overall well-being.

Furthermore, it could affect their academic performance. It's important for the school to provide a safe and inclusive environment for all students, regardless of their financial situation.

I've now 2 kids in the school, am a lone parent and €240 each to pay their school before uniforms, bags shoes etc. is very stressful. I've only paid €200 owe €40 and that will be one child paid but can't see how I'll manage the other child's fee; am very depressed with worry

Parent

I'm chronically ill, on my own with 2 depending children. I'm about to give up on everything

Parent

The stress and anxiety and pressure I'm under to pay is crazy. Both my sons have no locker, journal and no books due to me not being able to pay in time. They are being singled out. It's not fair as I have more than half of fees paid and still won't give them to my son who just started 1st year

Parent

We're broke trying to keep it all together. There's no end to it. Sometimes I can't sleep worrying so much about money

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Incurring debt, using credit cards or borrowed money from relatives to pay charges

A small number of survey responses from parents reported finding themselves unable to pay for their child's education without entering into debt.

Twenty-one respondents reported having to borrow money from relatives, use their credit card, or access their bank overdraft in order to pay the voluntary contribution for their child's school and to purchase books and uniforms. This can lead to additional debt and financial stress for the family.

We have had to get into some debt to pay for school contributions.

Parent

Had to get a loan this year to cover expenses as I have 5 children. Can't keep up at all.

Parent

We have had to take out a loan to cover back to school costs for our two children.

Parent

A credit union loan.

Parent

I have had to use credit card to pay it.

Parent

On top of the voluntary contribution, there is a €350 fee for transition year. That's €600 before I buy a book. It has seriously put a dent in our family finances, so much so I had to borrow money from my family to buy uniforms and shoes

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Sought assistance from SVP to pay school charges

According to the survey, some respondents reported having to seek assistance from the Saint Vincent de Paul organisation in order to pay for the voluntary contributions charged by their child's school.

This highlights the importance of organisations such as Saint Vincent de Paul in helping families access educational opportunities for their children.

It is expensive. Last time Saint Vincent paid for my child

Parent

I need support from St. Vincent de Paul.

Parent

I had to ask for help from SVP because I couldn't manage on my own paying it.

Parent

Affected their ability to seek healthcare or charges took priority for healthcare

Some respondents reported that school charges affected their ability to seek healthcare. One respondent reported having to reschedule medical appointments due to a lack of money to pay for them, while another reported opting not to attend the hospital for an injury.

These responses indicate that the financial burden of school charges may be compounding existing poverty and impacting the health and well-being of families.

Less food in the fridge, cutbacks on other items, like petrol for car, mobile costs even rescheduled a parent medical appointment to further in the year due to no money to pay.

Parent

I have 3 children 2 in secondary school and I have had to delay payments for the car and opted not to attend the hospital for wrist injury as it would cost 120 euro to be seen and I need to cover the 380 euro cost

Parent

Parents Survey

Themes Identified

Feelings of concern or embarrassment arising from non-payment

The financial burden of paying for a child's post-primary education can have a significant impact, not only on families' finances, but also on the children themselves. In some cases, children may feel embarrassed or ashamed if their parents are unable to afford the fees charged for attending school.

One respondent stated that their son was asked in front of his class to remind his parents that they hadn't paid the charge, while another noted that when the teacher asks their child where their homework notebook was, the whole class would realise that the fees hadn't been paid.

This can negatively affect a child's self-esteem and overall well-being. Children may feel that they are different from their peers, and they may worry about being judged or excluded by others. This can also lead to feelings of anxiety and depression which can affect their academic performance.

It is important for schools to have an open dialogue with parents and to provide assistance and support to those who may be experiencing financial difficulties. This can help to alleviate the stress and embarrassment that children may feel and ensure that all students have equal access to education.

Me and my husband just cut back on food for ourselves two meals, even though we have diabetes, just to pay because it's put on the blackboard who's paid and not, so other kids can see it which I think it's not fair.

Parent

I can pay by instalments which helps spread the cost out but with three kids in secondary it is a large cost I could do without. This year finances are tighter, I have cut back as much as possible on grocery shopping but it will still be a few weeks before I have managed to pay the entire amount of the "student admin fee" which the previously voluntary contribution has been renamed.

Parent

Had to be paid or child did not receive homework notebook. Teacher would ask where's your notebook, so all the class would know fees weren't paid. Very embarrassing for child.

Parent

They wanted me to give something so they suggested €20. They highlighted when my daughter gave up the envelope that is was just €20 in front of the other students.

Parent

School Survey



School Survey

Themes Identified

Introduction

In order to gather information on the role of voluntary contributions in post-primary schools, a survey was issued to 724 schools nationwide to determine the amount of voluntary contributions sought, with nineteen schools responding. To supplement the survey feedback, additional research was conducted through consultations with six schools which is discussed in greater detail in the next section. The findings from the survey and consultations are presented in the tables below, summarising the information received from the schools that responded to the survey and which request a voluntary contribution. The discussion aims to provide a deeper understanding of the voluntary contribution rates being requested of parents and the role that it plays in the funding of post-primary schools.

Out of the six post-primary schools consulted for case studies, five used the terminology of "voluntary contributions" for fees for pupils. However, it is not uncommon for schools to charge fees under different names as an alternative to, or to complement, the voluntary contribution charge. This could include terms such as "school contribution fee" or "general purpose fee" and may vary from school to school. It is important to understand the specific terminology and fees associated with each individual school in order to fully understand the financial obligations of attending that school. This issue was also raised in the survey of parents. Throughout this report we use the term voluntary contribution (VC) to refer to all similar charges, even if the school refers to them by a different name.

Voluntary contributions by school type

School type	Average for school type	Average for school type (DEIS)†	Average for school type (Non-DEIS)†
Voluntary	€153	€127	€159
ETB	€122	€118	€124
Community & Comprehensive	€134	€119	€150

† Some respondents were unsure as to whether or not their child's school was a DEIS school. This category of respondent is not shown. While these responses were included in the calculation of the overall average for each school type, they were excluded from the calculation of the averages for DEIS and non-DEIS Schools.

Payment rate of voluntary contribution

The table below details the percentage of parents that contribute towards the voluntary contribution. Despite best efforts to encourage post-primary schools to become involved in the research and complete the survey, the low number of responses and challenges regarding the quality of responses limited the insights that could be derived from the survey, in particular relating to how representative these figures are of the school sector as a whole. However, they do provide an approximate range against which the findings of the parents survey can be compared.

Payment rate by school type

School type	Number of respondents that request a VC	Percentage of parents that pay the VC		
		2019	2020	2021
Voluntary	9* (10)	60%	58%	58%
ETB	5* (6)	60%	60%	60%
Community & Comprehensive	2* (3)	48%	52%	60%

* Indicates the number of respondents that request a VC. The total number of schools that answered the question is shown in parentheses.

School Survey

Themes Identified

The view of schools

Schools indicated in their survey feedback that the voluntary contribution is vital to support the provision of resources and the running of programmes and extracurricular activities.

The comments below highlight the views of some post-primary schools that the voluntary contribution is a necessity for the provision of services such as lockers and school diaries, which they consider to be a standard part of post-primary schooling, as well as operational necessities such as insurance cover.

Despite the energy subsidy and a 40% increase in the standard capitation grant given to schools for day-to-day costs in 2022, voluntary contributions remain a mainstay of post-primary schools. The provision of activities and programmes considered core to the school experience is reliant on families' willingness or ability to pay the contributions and fees charged by schools.

The school feels that the system of voluntary contributions puts an unnecessary administrative burden on schools, is unfair on families that cannot afford it and creates an unhealthy pressure on genuine parents who want to support their schools. Some of these parents may not have the financial means to contribute but make sacrifices to do so.

Principal

If the Government was really serious about tackling this issue, it would fund schools appropriately so they do not need to seek additional payments from parents.

Principal

Voluntary contributions as a fund-raising effort should be abandoned. We use the term Student Services Fund. Schools should only invite parents to make contributions to goods/services which directly benefit their child.

Principal

Voluntary contributions are a symptom of the underfunding of the education system. We use the payment in order to cover the cost of running the school on a day to day basis.

Principal

School Case Studies



School Case Studies

Themes Identified

Introduction

There are a number of different types of post-primary schools in the Irish education system. The sector comprises voluntary secondary schools, community schools and comprehensive schools.

Grant Thornton sought to engage in consultations with each of the aforementioned school types. Through the cooperation of the Joint Managerial board and Education and Training Boards Ireland, six consultations were arranged. The purpose of these consultations was to furnish this report with a deeper understanding of the role voluntary contributions play in the Irish education system.

Voluntary contributions

Across each of the case studies it was found that the level of voluntary contributions requested has not changed for a number of years. For Case Studies 1 and 2, it has been seven and fifteen years respectively since there was an increase in the voluntary contribution. The monies received have not, therefore, kept pace with inflation. For the school in Case Study 2, the increase in average prices between January 2007 and January 2022 was 12.6%, according to CSO figures for the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices.

The reason for not increasing the charge cited in Case Studies 1, 2 and 3 was the schools' awareness of the burden voluntary contributions place on parents in light of the challenging post-economic crash environment and more recently the Covid and cost of living crises. There was a stated desire in these case studies to keep voluntary contribution charges at a minimum, despite school finances that were described as tight.

Items which are considered core elements of education, safety and learning—including photocopying, insurance and other administrative costs, as well as services such as lockers and school diaries—are either fully or partially covered by voluntary contributions or fixed charges.

When asked what occurs when there is a non-payment of the voluntary contribution, a number of approaches were described. In all case studies, reminder emails were issued, or parents were asked to meet the principal to describe their circumstances.

However, it must be noted that none of the schools consulted disadvantaged any pupil for non-payment. In Case Studies 4 and 5 the voluntary contribution policy of the school explicitly stated that some of the fee is reserved to help families that were not able to pay. However, these consultations may not be representative of the post-primary sector as a whole. Survey responses received from parents demonstrate that it is not always the case that pupils completely avoid being disadvantaged due to non-payment.

The only way to eliminate voluntary contributions is to eliminate the need for them. Given the important role they play in post-primary finances, an increase in funding from the Department would be required to allow for the ending of voluntary contributions without negatively affecting the resources and activities it supports.

Transparency for parents

The consultations revealed that there can often be a lack of transparency in how school charges and contributions are decided and used. In only one case were parent associations involved in determining the amounts to be charged for voluntary contributions and how these funds are used.

However, while Case Study 4 showed that including parents in the decision-making process led to an increase in payment rates, it is also notable that, in this case, the funds raised from voluntary contributions were ring-fenced for specific purposes, and not used for general operational costs. A separate charge was imposed to fund these costs.

School Case Studies

Themes Identified

Extracurricular activities

The interviews with the case study schools identified extracurricular activities, such as sporting trips and school tours, as being highly dependent on additional charges to parents. While fees are often charged for individual trips, it was reported that these fees only cover a proportion of the actual costs. Many consultees stated that these types of after-school activities would not take place without the support of additional charges or voluntary contributions.

Additionally, consultees reported that costs for these activities have been rising significantly, with limited willingness to increase charges. This could lead to a reduction of these activities in the future. Half of the consultees also mentioned that the cost of bus hire alone has increased by more than 30% this year, amounting to €1,000 for round trips. For schools with active sports programs, these costs were described as overwhelming.

Access to extracurricular activities is essential for pupils' physical and emotional development, offering an experience of learning and growth outside of the classroom. With such activities so heavily reliant on voluntary contributions and other payments from parents, there will always be a risk of a pupil being excluded, or of under-resourced communities not having access to these opportunities. However, the schools consulted for the case studies stated that they have policies in place to accommodate students who are unable to contribute.

Transition Year

Participating in transition year can be quite costly, with consultees reporting fees ranging from €320 to €470. These costs are in addition to trips abroad, which can cost upwards of €500 per student. Despite these high fees, consultees stated that the money collected from the charges does not fully cover the expenses associated with running the program.

One DEIS school reported that Departmental funding for the program amounted to only €95 per pupil. This lack of funding can create a risk of exclusion for pupils from low-income families or from schools in impoverished communities, resulting in a lack of equality in educational experience.

Resource intensive subjects

Many consultees reported that, due to rising costs for resource-intensive subjects, budgets have been significantly reduced. The Department provided art packs during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was seen as a positive step. However, these are not expected to continue, negatively affecting students, teachers, resources, and the quality of teaching and learning that happens in school. A voluntary DEIS school noted that it is not possible to ask parents for contributions towards buying art packs, which could further disadvantage schools located in communities where voluntary contributions are not paid.

Student facilities/resources

Voluntary contributions are often used to provide specific services or resources for students, such as journals, materials for classes, photocopying, and lockers. Three consultees described spending between €12,000 and €17,000 on lockers that are not funded by the Department, even in newly-built schools. As a result, the school has to charge locker fees of €10 as part of their voluntary contribution to cover these costs.

In cases where parents are unable to pay the voluntary contribution, pupils may not have access to the facilities covered by the fixed charges, such as lockers or school diaries, unless an exception is received. This creates a potential issue of inequality in access to these facilities between students whose parents are able to pay the contribution and those whose parents are not.

Adequate funding

All of the schools consulted expressed concern about the level of funding they receive. These concerns included the reliance on voluntary contributions for the provision of essential resources such as books, classroom materials, school journals, stationary, printing and lockers.

Lack of access to resources such as school journals and stationary can create barriers to participation in class and completion of assignments. Several consultees noted they had policies in place to ensure no pupil is disadvantaged due to an inability to pay contributions or charges. However, all of the consulted schools do issue repeated reminders to parents who have not paid the VC charge.

The DEIS school consultee highlighted the comparative disadvantage of low-income communities which are particularly affected by inadequate funding, as they may not have the same level of financial resources from parents or community members to make up the shortfall.

School Case Studies

Themes Identified

Fundraising

Consultees stated that all fundraising activities, ranging from cake sales to non-uniform days were for the purpose of raising money for charity. The monies played no role in contributing to school finances or extra-curricular activities in the schools that were consulted. The governance of these fundraising activities was described as strict, with funds going directly to the charity rather than being collected by staff or the school.

Greater autonomy

Voluntary contributions are viewed as a key enabler of autonomy for schools to pursue activities and programmes that are not funded by Departmental grants. These can include career programmes, study skills, training courses, subscriptions and school facilities. A centralised system of funding for all aspects of school activity prevents schools from making local decisions and having a sense of individuality in how they wish to support their students.

School-specific issues

Schools also noted specific challenges related to their particular environment. For example one rural school has significant transport-related costs, while another school has to deal with social issues within its own community.

Collaboration opportunities

Consultations with schools have revealed that they are facing significant pressure from rising costs, particularly for energy and staffing. It is not uncommon for schools to work in isolation when trying to get the best pricing for energy, printing, buses, equipment, and other expenses.

Some consultees mentioned that enhanced support from management bodies could be beneficial in terms of collaboration, guidance on agreements and contracts, and purchasing wholesale. Such support could help schools to reduce costs and improve their budgeting.

For example, by collaborating with other schools or educational institutions, schools could negotiate better prices for energy and other services, while purchasing in bulk or wholesale could enable schools to secure lower prices on items like equipment or printing services. Additionally, guidance on contracts and agreements could help schools to get the best value for their money.

Both the school survey and the case studies have made it clear that schools are facing significant financial pressures; better collaboration could help them to manage these costs more effectively.

School Case Studies

Themes Identified

Case study comparison

The fees for the case study schools range from a low of €50 up to potentially more than €250, with three schools having both a voluntary contribution and additional charges. Transition year fees are significantly higher, ranging from €300 to €500.

Families would be aware of these costs when deciding whether or not to participate in transition year. It would be concerning if these higher fees were a factor in causing any family to decide not to participate in transition year, depriving some pupils who may have benefitted from the programme.

	Case Study #1	Case Study #2	Case Study #3	Case Study #4	Case Study #5	Case Study #6
School type	Voluntary	Voluntary	Voluntary	ETB	ETB	ETB
Voluntary contribution requested?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Voluntary contribution amount	–	€100	€250	€50	€100 – €120	€100 – €170
Charges in place other than the voluntary contribution	€100	€150	–	€50	–	Up to €250 in certain years
Voluntary contribution /charges applied to TY pupils	€300	€420	€300	€450	€550	€30
Percentage of parents that pay VCs/charges	80%	50%	80%	60% – 70%	60% – 78%	90%

Two out of the three voluntary schools had a comprehensive fee or charge for families, while the remaining voluntary school and the three ETB schools offered the option to opt out of certain resources or activities, in order to lower costs for families.

Only two of the six schools consulted involved the parents association in the decision-making process regarding the amounts to be charged and how the money raised is used.

All schools reported that the voluntary contributions have not kept pace with inflation, due to concerns about the burden increases would place on families. As a result, the purchasing power of these charges has declined over time and this trend is expected to continue under current economic conditions.

Only one school highlighted the importance of voluntary contributions and charges in maintaining school autonomy in decision-making.

Theme	Case Study #1	Case Study #2	Case Study #3	Case Study #4	Case Study #5	Case Study #6
Voluntary contributions ring-fenced for student resources and activities?	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	N/A
System of charges	One fee	One fee	One fee (with opt-outs)	One fee (with opt-outs)	One fee (with opt-outs)	One fee
Parents' association involved in formulating voluntary contributions?	No	No	No	Yes	No	N/A

School Case Studies

Themes Identified

Case study comparison

An analysis of the 6 case studies found that none of the schools had kept pace with inflation when it came to the price of school charges or voluntary contributions. This means that the fees and charges that schools were asking parents to pay had not increased at the same rate as the general cost of living.

This can be a significant problem for schools, as it means that the quantity of goods and services that can be procured for each student declines over time. Rising costs for items such as energy, equipment, and supplies puts pressure on schools' budgets, and without an increase in fees or contributions, schools may struggle to keep up. This can result in a lack of resources and a lower quality schooling experience for students.

All the schools followed up on non-payment of voluntary contributions to varying degrees, emphasizing the importance of these charges on school finances. Four out of five schools sent reminders, and one requested a meeting with parents for non-payment. However, no further action was taken for non-payment, and no child was disadvantaged as a result.

It is worth noting that the department does not provide funding for student locker facilities, even in newly built schools. Two schools described incurring significant costs to provide these facilities, with annual charges of €10 included under their VCs.

Theme	Case Study #1	Case Study #2	Case Study #3	Case Study #4	Case Study #5	Case Study #6
Have VCs/charges kept pace with inflation	No	No	No	No	No	No
Cited role of VC's in maintain school autonomy	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
School follows up on non-payment by families	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
School ensures no child is disadvantaged by non-payment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

School Case Study #1

Voluntary School

- ❖ 530 students
- ❖ Non-DEIS
- ❖ West of Ireland
- ❖ VC Requested: €100
- ❖ TY Charge: €300
- ❖ VC Uses: Essential school costs, including heat and light; extracurricular activities, including bus trips

The accountant would say, “You have to get that money in”, such is its importance to the schools finances

Principal

The fee charged at this school is €100 and is called a “General Purpose Fee” to cover essential school costs. This amount has not been increased for several years and has therefore not kept pace with inflation. The school is very reluctant to increase the fee; however, heat and lights bills—which were already huge cost areas before the Ukraine conflict—are a cause of concern. The contribution was reduced to €80 during the Covid pandemic, in recognition of the challenges facing parents. In a typical year 80% of parents would pay the contribution.

The cost of transition year is €300. However this does not cover all of the actual costs involved, which places a financial burden on the school. Finances were described as very tight, with careful management of budgeting required. The proportion of finances that the general contribution fee provides was described as huge, with the school running at a loss in its absence.

Extracurricular costs in particular were described as “bleeding us dry”, with bus tours alone costing €1,000 for a round trip. Levies on parents for activities only cover one third of costs incurred for such activities. Contributions from parents are vital to funding these activities and essential school supplies.



Stock Photo

School Case Study #2

Voluntary School

- ❖ 1,020 students
- ❖ Non-DEIS
- ❖ Kilkenny
- ❖ VC Requested: €150
- ❖ TY Charge: €420
- ❖ Other Charges: €100 (expenses), €50 (building fund)
- ❖ VC Uses: School diaries, insurance, art materials and photocopying expenses

The voluntary contributions are an important part of our finance definitely. What the voluntary contribution achieves in part is a certain amount of autonomy for schools to respond to the unique needs of students within a given school. It gives flexibility to do that.

Principal

A VC of €150 (€420 in transition year) is requested of parents, in addition to a contribution to expenses of €100 and €50 towards a building fund. Approximately 50% of parents pay the VC, rising to 70% for parents of transition year students.

The school treats the VC as voluntary and, while reminders are issued, no child is disadvantaged by non-payment. Partial contributions are also accepted. The contribution to expenses was introduced to replace a system that charged for items individually. The fee helps to cover the costs of school diaries, insurance, art materials and photocopying. The money the school took in in the last academic year amounted to 30% of what is received from the Department of Education in grants, and represents 25% of the schools total income.

The VC amount has remained static for the past fifteen years and so does not reflect the inflation that has occurred in that time. There is a sense among school management that post-primary has had to manage one crisis after another. It has had to deal with significant funding cuts in the years following the financial crash, and during the Covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis. Despite a strong case for increasing the charge, especially given its importance to school finances, the school is conscious that that would place further hardship on families.

The VC plays an important role in this school by affording greater autonomy in decision making, and in implementing quality-of-life improvements to the school. One example provided was the refurbishment of the hockey pitch, for which Departmental funding was not forthcoming. The contribution also supports activities such as study skills training and careers programmes, which are not viewed as essential by the Department, but which benefit students and contribute to better outcomes for pupils.

The school management do not consider strong centralisation of decision making, where every programme is decided by the Department, as good for post-primary. They view autonomy as working well for schools and it should be protected, with greater latitude provided in choosing how to best support pupils based on local conditions. There are no further charges for extracurricular activities, with these activities dependent on the VC and the good will of teachers volunteering their personal time to support students. The principal notes that this opportunity is not afforded to pupils in all schools and this is where inequality can arise.

School Case Study #3

Voluntary School

- ❖ 252 pupils
- ❖ DEIS school
- ❖ Dublin
- ❖ VC Requested: €250
- ❖ TY Charge: €300
- ❖ VC Uses: Book rental, insurance, TY/LCA, mock exams, light, heat, and secretarial expenses

There's no political will [to support the school] as there was no upcoming election and the people in [the area] do not vote

Principal

A recent initiative of the school has been to amalgamate all the school costs into this all-encompassing fee, which is broken down as follows, the book rental scheme (40%), insurance costs (4%), TY/LCA costs (8%), mock fees (4%), administration costs and other expenses (44%), including light, heat, and secretarial costs, among other items. 60% of the fee revenue is spent on the direct costs of goods and services, with the remainder covering essential school administration and operating costs.

Despite being an economically deprived school and in receipt of DEIS support, this Dublin school features voluntary contributions that amount to €250 for all years except transition year, where costs rise to €300. Family reductions are available for families with multiple children, as well as payment plans to spread the cost of the contribution. Typically 80% of parents pay the voluntary contribution, however opt outs are available for certain aspects such as the book scheme, with associated discounts. This figure dropped to 60% during the pandemic, placing additional pressure on the school.

At the beginning of the academic year the school is operating with a €45,000 deficit, with the largest component attributable to the Department of Education not funding school secretaries. As the school building is old, energy costs have increased dramatically with electricity bills amounting to €20,000, water costs of €10,000 and insurance costs rising 12% in one year. Despite some temporary supports in place since the pandemic and for the current energy crisis, the school is facing cutting subject budgets for resource-intensive subjects like Home Economics and Technical Graphics. Art packs previously made available during the pandemic are expected to be discontinued which has had direct impacts on the students and teachers, and on the quality of teaching and learning that can happen in the school. As a DEIS school, it receives an additional €54 euro per pupil while the transition year programme receives €95 per pupil from the Department. However, the impact is limited when parents have such constrained capacity to fill the remaining gap to the true cost of many activities.

The school has had to place limits on teachers' printing with colour and there are limited resources to spend on certain subjects. The principal expressed concern that they do not have the finances to engage pupils sufficiently and limits are being placed on teachers' ability to help them succeed.

School Case Study #4

ETB School

- ❖ 383 pupils
- ❖ Non-DEIS school (Development School)
- ❖ Dublin
- ❖ VC Requested: €50
- ❖ TY Charge: €360 (€450 from September 2023)
- ❖ Fixed Charge: €50
- ❖ VC Uses: School journals, locker rental, accident insurance, postage, SMS notifications, stationary and reports

Schools shouldn't be asking parents for voluntary contributions...if there was no voluntary contributions in this school, today I wouldn't have been sending three buses to football matches

Principal

This ETB school is a development school based in the Dublin region. It currently has 383 pupils but will grow to 500 in the next intake in September. The school charges a €50 voluntary contribution in addition to a fixed charge of €50 for school journals, locker rental, personal accident insurance, postage costs, SMS notifications, stationary and reports. In all cases partial payments and payment plans are accommodated. Transition year costs amount to €360 for the academic year, increasing next year to €450 as a result of rising costs. Struggling families can and do pay on a per-trip basis where financial struggles are identified.

The school has a separate budgeting system for voluntary contribution funds to ensure they are ring-fenced for specific items including college-based activities, induction, leadership programmes, awards, ceremonies, extracurricular activities, and sports days. The school spent €17,000 on lockers and charges €10 rental fee as part of the voluntary contribution. The voluntary contribution policy was designed with the parents' association resulting in a significant degree of transparency as to how funds are used.

Typically 100% of parents pay the contribution in first year which reduces to 60-70% in subsequent years. Willingness to pay has no role in whether a child is accepted into the school and no pupil is disadvantaged for non-payment. While the school is not a DEIS school, there is a cohort of pupils attending the school that would be considered to be from economically disadvantaged households.

The principal cites the significant costs facing parents, including €600 for iPads, €200 for books and other costs for classroom resources, tracksuits, equipment, and fees for both mock and State examinations, although the latter was paid for by the Department last year. There is concern that this arrangement will not be kept in place next year. In cases where parents have not paid the voluntary contribution, teachers will correct mock examination papers, which is not the case in other schools. The school is cognisant of financial pressures on families and makes efforts to ensure no pupil is adversely affected.

School Case Study #5

ETB School

- ❖ 915 pupils
- ❖ Non-DEIS school
- ❖ Dublin
- ❖ VC Requested: €100 – €120
- ❖ TY Charge: €550
- ❖ Mock Exams: €130
- ❖ VC Uses: Accident coverage, journals, lockers, study skills, assessment tests, sports facilities and extra-curricular activities

With the current rate of inflation, we have made every effort to keep costs contained for families, given other pressures on household budgets

Principal

This co-educational school, with 915 pupils charges a voluntary contribution of €120 for first-year students and €100 for subsequent years. The cost for Transition Year is €550, and mock exam fees for Junior and Leaving Certificate students are an additional €130 per pupil. The voluntary contribution payment rate ranges from 70% to 78% annually, with 98% paying the Transition Year fees. The school's principal estimates that voluntary contributions across post-primary schools range from €100 to €250, but with inflation, costs are expected to increase. Not paying the voluntary contribution does not negatively impact a child's education, but parents are asked to explain why they are unable to pay. All costs are listed on the school's website and include accident coverage, journals, lockers, study skills, and assessment tests.

The voluntary contribution enables the school to fund extracurricular activities that would otherwise be impossible, with the principal citing an annual expenditure of €26,000 on resources and activities. This includes costs associated with an astroturf pitch that did not receive funding from the Department. The voluntary contribution is ring-fenced and cannot be used for general expenditure. Given financial pressures on families, the school does not plan to increase the voluntary contribution in the coming years and is working to contain costs within their limited resources. Examples of rising costs include bus expenditure increasing from €6,000 last year to €10,000 this year, and material costs for Engineering, Construction Studies, and Home Economics rising from €40,000 to a projected €60,000 to €70,000 next year.

The school is concerned about the future outlook and rising costs despite temporary funding from the Department to assist with energy costs and temporary increases to the Capitation Grant. If this temporary funding had not been provided by the Department this year, the principal noted that certain activities would have to have been pared back this year.

School Case Study #6

ETB School

- ❖ 592 pupils
- ❖ Non-DEIS school
- ❖ Kerry
- ❖ VC Requested: €30 – €170
- ❖ School trips: €6 per student
- ❖ Uses: Books and tablets, lockers for sixth years, extracurricular activities including sports and school trips

Those that struggle the most seem to be the most consistent in paying. At times this weighs on me; that those most impoverished tend to be most consistent

Principal

The school, located in rural Kerry, serves a diverse student population and currently has 582 students, including over 60 Ukrainian students who have enrolled since March 2020. To support the school's operations, a voluntary contribution is requested from families, with different levels of fees based on the students' year level. For first year students, the fee is €170, and it decreases to €110 for the next two years, €30 in fifth year and €100 in sixth year. However, additional charges may apply for school trips and activities. The school has a policy in place to ensure that no family pays more than €450, and offers an online payment system for parents to pay in instalments.

The school does send reminders to families who have not paid the contribution, but the language used is gentle and no further action is taken beyond these reminders. All students, regardless of whether or not the contribution has been paid, are provided with the necessary books and tablets, lockers for sixth years, and resources as needed. The school has a payment rate of 90% for the voluntary contribution, with most families paying in full and willing to contribute. However, the principal expressed concern that the families who are least able to pay are the most consistent in making the contribution, which weighs on his conscience.

The contributions are used to support extracurricular activities, such as school sports and trips. Despite charging a €6 fee per student, which has remained unchanged for a decade, the school still incurs a loss on each trip. The school is hesitant to increase the fee for trips, which would remain loss-making even if the fee increased to €10 per student, to avoid placing further financial burden on families. If the school did not have the ability to ask for voluntary contributions, the school would prioritise providing books for students. The provision of other activities would be uncertain due to the school running losses in most areas.

Appendix



Parents Survey

Findings

In order to evaluate the role of voluntary contributions in post-primary schools, we asked parents to provide the amount of voluntary contributions they currently pay to inform our analysis across the various school types and size categories.

Voluntary contributions by school type

School type	Average for school type	Average for school type* (DEIS)	Average for school type* (Non-DEIS)
Voluntary	€153	€127	€159
ETB	€122	€118	€124
Community & Comprehensive	€134	€119	€150

Voluntary contributions by school type – interquartile range

Quartiles segment any set of values, ordered from lowest to highest, into four equal parts. The table below outlines the interquartile range across the first, second and third quartiles, Q1 is the value below which 25 percent of the responses lie, Q2 is the value below which 50 percent of the responses lie, and Q3 is the value below which 75 percent of the responses lie.

The second quartile, Q2, is also the 50th percentile and represents the mid-point, or median value, of each category.

School type	25 th percentile	50 th percentile (median)	75 th percentile
Voluntary	€100	€110	€170
Voluntary DEIS	€80	€100	€123
Voluntary Non-DEIS	€100	€150	€200

School type	25 th percentile	50 th percentile (median)	75 th percentile
ETB	€79	€100	€150
ETB DEIS	€78	€100	€150
ETB Non-DEIS	€80	€100	€150

School type	25 th percentile	50 th percentile (median)	75 th percentile
Community & Comprehensive	€70	€100	€150
Community & Comprehensive DEIS	€63	€100	€145
Community & Comprehensive Non-DEIS	€88	€120	€180

* Some respondents were unsure as to whether or not their child's school was a DEIS school. This category of respondent is not shown. While these responses were included in the calculation of the overall average for each school type, they were excluded from the calculation of the averages for DEIS and non-DEIS Schools.

Parents Survey

Findings

Voluntary contributions by school size

Based on the survey responses of medium-sized schools, classed as schools with between 450 and 700 students, the voluntary contribution charged was highest among Voluntary schools.

The reason for this is beyond the scope of this report, however this may be an indicator of greater financial need in the Voluntary sector for the contribution given the lower capitation grant received by these schools.

School type	Medium (450-750)	Potential Revenue for a medium school	Adjusted for 60% payment rate	Adjusted for 80% payment rate
Voluntary	€164	€73,800 - 123,000	€44,280 – 73,800	€59,040 – 98,400
ETB	€120	€54,000 - 90,000	€32,400 – 54,000	€43,200 – 72,000
Community & Comprehensive	€141	€63,450 - 105,750	€38,070 – 63,450	€50,760 – 84,600

For large schools, classed as schools with between 750 and 1000 students, based on survey respondents the voluntary contribution was again highest in the Voluntary sector; the disparity was, however, less pronounced.

School type	Large (750 - 1000)	Potential Revenue for a large school	Adjusted for 60% payment rate	Adjusted for 80% payment rate
Voluntary	€154	€115,500 – 154,000	€39,300 – 92,400	€92,000 – 123,200
ETB	€127	€95,250 – 127,000	€38,100 – 101,600	€76,200 – 101,600
Community & Comprehensive	€134	€100,500 – 134,000	€60,300 – 80,400	€80,400 – 107,200

Parents Survey

Findings

Voluntary contributions by school type – rural vs urban

We sought to identify whether a disparity exists between rural and urban schools in terms of whether a school requests a voluntary contribution, and of the amount requested. 81% of rural schools requested a voluntary contribution compared to 88% of urban schools.

As detailed in the table below, across all school categories the average voluntary contribution was higher in urban schools than in rural schools, defined as a school situated in a rural settlement with a population of less than 5,000 and with areas of open countryside. Among rural and urban DEIS schools, the voluntary contribution sought in ETBs and voluntary schools were largely the same.

Rural	Average VC Charged	Average VC Charged* (DEIS)	Average VC Charged* (Non-DEIS)
Voluntary	€123	€128	€128
ETB	€109	€117	€94
Community & Comprehensive	€119	€111	€123

Urban	Average VC Charged	Average VC Charged* (DEIS)	Average VC Charged* (Non-DEIS)
Voluntary	€163 (+33%)	€126 (-2%)	€169 (+32%)
ETB	€128 (+17%)	€119 (+2%)	€135 (+44%)
Community & Comprehensive	€143 (+20%)	€124 (+12%)	€162 (+32%)

* Some respondents were unsure as to whether or not their child's school was a DEIS school. This category of respondent is not shown. While these responses were included in the calculation of the overall average for each school type, they were excluded from the calculation of the averages for DEIS and non-DEIS Schools.

Parents Survey

Findings

Voluntary contributions Dublin vs non-Dublin School

Unsurprisingly, given that the cost of living and salaries tend to be higher in the capital, the average voluntary contribution charged was significantly higher in Dublin compared to the rest of the country. With the exception of DEIS ETB schools in Dublin, the voluntary contributions as reported by parents were higher in the capital across most school types.

Non-Dublin Schools	Average VC Charged	Average VC Charged* (DEIS)	Average VC Charged* (Non-DEIS)
Voluntary	€143	€125	€145
ETB	€118	€118	€119
Community & Comprehensive	€128	€110	€146

Dublin Schools	Average VC Charged	Average VC Charged* (DEIS)	Average VC Charged* (Non-DEIS)
Voluntary	€202 (+41%)	€142 (+14%)	€227 (+57%)
ETB	€140 (+19%)	€111 (-6%)	€142 (+19%)
Community & Comprehensive	€160 (+25%)	€155 (+41%)	€165 (+13%)

* Some respondents were unsure as to whether or not their child's school was a DEIS school. This category of respondent is not shown. While these responses were included in the calculation of the overall average for each school type, they were excluded from the calculation of the averages for DEIS and non-DEIS Schools.



© 2023 Grant Ireland. All rights reserved.

'Grant Thornton' refers to the brand under which the Grant Thornton member firms provide assurance, tax and advisory services to their clients and/or refers to one or more member firms, as the context requires. Grant Thornton International Ltd (GTIL) and the member firms are not a worldwide partnership. GTIL and each member firm is a separate legal entity. Services are delivered by the member firms. GTIL does not provide services to clients. GTIL and its member firms are not agents of, and do not obligate, one another and are not liable for one another's acts or omissions.