

Future Proofing Access to Education

A tool for learning, not division.

“help with [electronic] tablets started over 10 years ago, it’s been coming down the line a long time” – Michael, SVP Volunteer.

Introduction

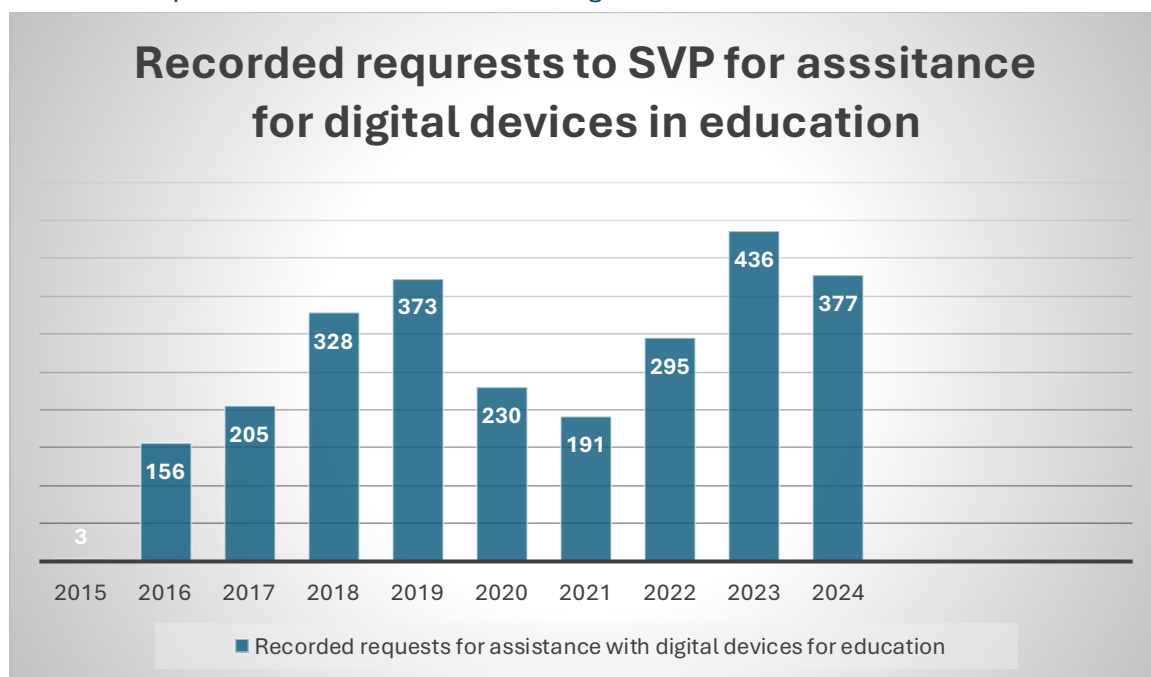
At SVP, we firmly believe in the transformational power of education. Our members have seen how education gives people the power to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. The CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), reflects this, as it shows that higher educational attainment has a major impact on reducing the risk of poverty and deprivation. Ireland has an aspiration, and the mandate of our constitution, to provide free education for all children and young people, however, the reality is that there is still a cost, and for low-income households, this cost is greater.

In 2023, SVP provided €5.3 million towards education. Within the requests for assistance we receive we are for support with educational essentials such as uniforms, shoes, voluntary contributions and school charges of any other name, mock and exam charges, transition year costs, extracurricular activities like swimming lessons and school trips, photocopying and digital devices and in recent years, school books and classroom resources.

SVP works relentlessly in the area of education because we know it is a key element for a child and young person to draw themselves out of the poverty cycle and gain their self-sufficiency. For over 20 years SVP Social Justice team campaigned for free school books, because you, our Members, were seeing how the cost of school books were a barrier for children and young people to their education, and the great stress this cost placed on family's finances. Inequality has been baked into our education system through the decisions that place financial barriers to children and young people.

Total recorded requests for assistance for tablets and electronic device for education over 10 years is 2,594.

Recorded requests for assistance to SVP for digital devices in education.



Data includes requests for third level education and training. We can see the reduction in 2020 and 2021, this may be due to the government support to third level institutions to purchase and loan laptops to students during the covid pandemic.

We provide two recommendations to the Department of Education:

1. Direct funding to schools to purchase digital devices to loan to students.
2. Gather and share data on the quantity of schools and school types that have introduced digital devices as mandatory and the associated payment arrangements.

Free School Books on a digital device

“My daughter is starting first year and they have mandatory ipads which are coming it at over 700 euro and I don’t know how I’m going to cover it I also have an older daughter heading into 5th year that needs new uniform too.” Request for assistance from a parent to SVP.

As a direct result of the introduction of the free school books in primary schools in 2023, SVP experienced a reduction in 20% of requests for assistance with back to school support. In 2024 we saw a further, but lower, 6% reduction in calls at back to school time, when free school books had been introduced for the junior cycle. This year, calls for back to school reduced further by 3%. This demonstrates that policy is the makes a difference and is one of the most important factors for eradicating, preventing further and deepening poverty.

From this year on, all children and young people in the free state education system, which we estimate to be over 940,000^{1 2} will have free access to their school books and workbooks hardcopies and classroom resources.

We know that the introduction of free schoolbooks has not just helped families with the cost of education but has aimed to ensure all children will have a more inclusive educational experience and live better lives because of their educational attainment.

However now that parents no longer have to buy their child or children’s school books there is a growing requirement for parents to privately fund a digital device for their children because it’s the only way they can access their free school books. This cost has become a replacement for the previous cost of school books. For those schools that have adopted digital devices as mandatory for all students school and homework those pupils can only access their free school books on a digital device which is required to be privately funded by their parents. This undermines the free school books scheme entirely.

¹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mip/measuringirelandsprogress2022/education/#:~:text=Primary%20school%20enrolment%20increase,d%20by,526%2C422%20pupils%20to%20558%2C143%20pupils>

² <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/statistical-bulletin-202324.pdf>

Senior Cycle Reform

“my daughter just started 6th yr doing leaving cert this year and her fees are €400 and she needs a laptop for this year for projects” - Request for assistance to SVP.

From September 2025 onwards all pupils in the senior cycle will experience a new curriculum, which will include additional components such as project work and assignments on an ongoing basis which will be required to be completed and submitted electronically, this work will contribute to their Leaving Certificate results. Continuous access to a digital device will be central to the development of a student's project work.

For those parents who cannot afford to provide the cost of a device and associated costs such as insurance, broadband etc, their children will be immediately left behind in this new curriculum and as a consequence their final marks, will more likely suffer because of this. We know from research that gaps in educational attainment already exist, as highlighted in a recent OECD report, which sets out to review the resourcing of schools to address educational disadvantage. It says despite our schools' strong achievements academically, challenges remain, *“Important differences in student outcomes persist for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.”*³ This will only be heightened by the digital divide in this new curriculum reform.

Due to the curriculum reform, digital access is now vital in education, but families should not bear the cost and the barrier should be removed to ensure young people can access their education utilising digital devices. This can be done when schools provide funded devices on loan to all pupils in the senior cycle.

SVP Case Studies

Charitable organisations should not be a solution to systemic school policy.

It is SVPs policy to respond to an individual or family where there is a need. We respond to individuals who contact us for friendship and or assistance. The response to funding and providing digital devices to pupils in our free state education system shouldn't be resolved by schools advising struggling families to have to reach out to charity as the solution to the cost of a digital device for their children's education.

*“As secondary-level classes now require a tablet for learning, I was advised to ask if the school has any spare or unused tablets my daughter could borrow, since we cannot afford even to rent one. **The school advised to contact your organization.**”* Request for assistance to SVP, July 2025.

Using phones for homework is a part of the digital divide

SVP run a homework club for pupils who are in need of extra study support due to the difficult circumstance of their home lives, such as living in direct provision or temporary

³ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-review-of-resourcing-schools-to-address-educational-disadvantage-in-ireland_3433784c-en.html

accommodation. The team leading the classes realised that tablets were needed as the pupils school had adopted digital devices for homework as compulsory. The young people attending the homework club were doing their homework on their mobile phones.

The team saw the difficulty this caused, using such a small screen for moving around a work page, reading and typing their work. The team could see phones were an unusable device for homework, but phones were the only device the children had access to. The education committee sourced refurbished, second-hand chrome book tablets for a cost of €150, €129⁴ under their retail price for a firsthand one. The young people got to keep the device to use at school too.

Finding a solution to ensure the young people weren't using a completely unsuitable device was a great outcome for them, but the school who decided to adopt digital devices should have been cognisant that not all pupils would have access to the money to buy these devices and put in place supports to those whose families could not afford the large upfront cost. If a young persons only option was for them to use their phone when their peers had access to tablets this is a divide in access.

The Cost

The Barnardos annual 'Back to School' report demonstrates the average digital costs for primary and post primary pupils. The average cost of digital devices in post primary schools has risen by €309 since 2022, and by €101⁵ for primary school pupils in the same years.

Average Cost per year	2025	2024	2023	2022
Post Primary	€430	€168	€147	€121
Primary	€147	€51	€48	€46

The Money Advice Service (MABS) 'Cost of Education Report 2020-2021', highlights that it's not just the cost of a device, there are other associated costs that arise from digital devices. The report evidences the initial cost for the device, cover and annual insurance to the total of €622 for a student in first year, 2020-2021⁶. The report also

⁴ https://www.harveynorman.ie/computing/chromebook/lenovo-duet-chromebook-11m889-10.95-mediatek-8gb-128gb-luna-grey.html?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22616147750&gbraid=0AAAAADkWKyrlcHNDIObpu5JUUhD-x5gC&gclid=Cj0KCOjwwZDFBhCpARIsAB95qO1gaH4-aL6sDWc4wgrm_Z-d78MUYTOVGi6Ty-LMuCrcOjJQymDRKsaAh0HEALw_wcB

⁵ <https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/barnardos-back-to-school-survey-2022.pdf>
<https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Barnardos-Back-to-School-Survey-Summary-2023-Final-3.pdf>
<https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Barnardos-Back-to-School-2024-Full-Report.pdf>
<https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Barnardos-Back-To-School-Report-2025.pdf>

⁶ <https://assets.mabs.ie/documents/education-cost-survey-2021web.pdf>

noted a monthly payment of €15 for Wi-Fi. The additional costs of broadband, replacement, the lifespan of a device which is being used for several hours a day, 5 days a week, and rise in electricity cost are not measured but these costs exist and must be considered.

Paying in instalments also costs more through a poverty premium attached for those families who cannot afford to pay for a digital device upfront. *“Digital devices are a fortune. €700 for the school laptop. €900 if I pay in instalments.”*⁷ Therefore those unable or less able to buy the device upfront pay more.

Government Investment in ICT for Schools

We must acknowledge there has been a sizable investment in ICT for schools. The current strategy ‘The Digital Strategy for Schools 2027’ directs €200 million of funding into schools ICT under the National Development Plan.⁸

As with much of school funding, the school boards are given control on what the ICT funding is spent on, the department of education acknowledge school boards have full control and knowledge of their ICT needs and digital learning plan. The funding can be used to purchase digital devices, “such as tablets, hybrid devices, or laptops.”⁹

The Department of Education’s guidance on school book funding currently for post primary schools only, when all other purchases have been made and there is remaining surplus funding, digital devices can be purchased to loan students. The guidance says **“if surplus funding remains, schools may use the funding to facilitate the provision of a digital device loan scheme to students as required”**.¹⁰ No such detail exists in the guidance to parents.¹¹

Conclusion

The government have made steps in its commitments to improving the growth and use of ICT in schools. In recent years they have also made a commitment to developing policy for free education such as free school meals and the free school books scheme.

SVP have seen firsthand in our requests for assistance and visitation work that these policies have made an immediate and positive impact to children’s and young peoples’ lives. The reduction in calls for back to school support demonstrates that removing the costs of school books has reduced the demands on family’s finances and it also has

⁷ <https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Barnardos-Back-To-School-Report-2025.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2025-03-05a.201&s=%22back+to+school%22+2025-03-03..2025-03-07#g203.r>

⁹ <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2025-03-05a.201&s=%22back+to+school%22+2025-03-03..2025-03-07#g203.r>

¹⁰ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/schoolbooks-grant-guidance-for-post-primary-schools-2025-2026.pdf>

¹¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/information-for-parentsguardians-schoolbooks-scheme-in-post-primary-schools.pdf>

enabled us as a charity to utilise our financial assistance to other areas for those we support.

However, the provision of digital devices to be funded privately through parents rather than schools for children's and young people's education is a very real and growing concern. Before this problem grows further, it needs policy and action that says no child or young person will experience digital exclusion in their educational lives. Particularly as the policy of free school books is completely undermined for those pupils who can only access their free school books and work books on privately purchased or hired digital devices. Within the new senior cycle reform continuous access to a device on loan from the school is essential to the students school work, final results and future successes. Without this, the reformed curriculum will leave some students behind, struggling to complete and submit their project work and negatively affecting their final results.

Therefore we conclude and recommend that the government provide funding to schools to purchase digital devices to loan to pupils so that they can carry out their project work. We recommend that the Department of Education gather data on the quantity of schools and school types that have introduced digital devices as mandatory and the associated payment arrangements.

There is still great costs associated to going to school in our free education system, and when digital devices are introduced into schools and are a requirement for project work for pupils final results, this is a sizeable cost to many families and pupils will struggle to do their work and therefore their final results will suffer. Our government should ensure every child and young person can access and achieve in their education without a digital divide.