



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

NATIONAL OFFICE

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We at the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul are driven to enable and strengthen peoples access to education. Education is a key influential factor for a person to break the cycle of poverty and create a better life for themselves and their families. Education can change lives, which is why we provide so much financial support to education through our visitation work, working with schools and through our further training and education bursary scheme. Education is a key brief for our Social Justice Team who carry out research, campaigns and lobbying for better equity in education, and in every pre-budget submission set our researched, evidence-based policy recommendations for the government.

In 2025 we provided €3.2 million in education support. Approximately half of this was to families of children and young people in our primary and post primary schools to meet costs such as uniforms, digital devices, “voluntary” contributions or school charges of any other name, mock and exam fees, equipment, travel, swimming lessons, school days out, etc., all of which are financial barriers that create inequality in a child’s or young person’s life. The other half of our education funding went toward those seeking support with further education and training through our bursary scheme.

Before 2040, financial and participation barriers are removed for all children to be able to participate in their education. By 2040 the statement *“Free state education is truly free”* should be realised. The current imposition of charges to parents for sending their children to state schools stands in direct contradiction to the founding principle of providing free state education to all children in Ireland.

Despite being labelled as voluntary, some parents receive multiple contacts requesting the payment, some of which involve children being handed letters or families being named and shamed for non-payment or threats being made about the pupils access to lockers, exam results, insurance etc. All of which make it clear that this payment is not voluntary. One example is a school who does not allow a pupil to put their name down for the TY trip if the voluntary contribution hadn’t been paid in the previous three years. While we work constructively with many schools that show empathy and understanding towards families and their local community, these practices, though driven by financial necessity, are fundamentally unfair and unjust. ‘Voluntary’ contributions perpetuate inequality within an already under-resourced system: this, in the very system that is supposed to support pupils to achieve educational and training attainment and a better quality of life, a life lived out of poverty. By 2040, the cost of running the school day, including transition year should

be fully understood and funded so that schools don't have to fundraise through lottery or voluntary contributions or school charges of any other name. We recommend that schools are given a higher capitation grant rate for making their school uniforms more affordable as outlined in circular 0032/2017.¹

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 and in 2025 calls for back to school reduced further by 3%. This demonstrates that conscience policy which removes barriers is one of the most important factors for eradicating, preventing further and deepening poverty and inequality in our education system.

However, now that parents no longer have to buy their child or children's school books there is a growing necessity for parents to privately fund a digital device for their children. Due to the curriculum reform, digital access is now vital in education, but families should not bear the cost and this cost should be removed to ensure young people can access their education utilising digital devices. This cost has become a replacement for the previous cost of school books. This undermines the free school books scheme entirely. Therefore a policy change is needed, and by 2040, individual digital devices for class and home and exam work are provided directly by the Department of Education, with no cost to families.

By 2040, all education policy is poverty proofed so that in every decision the Department of Education, boards of management and schools make, the policy will not have a negative impact on children and young people from marginalised or lower socio-economic families. Inequality in our state school system needs to be addressed beyond DEIS & DEIS+ schools, however poverty, unaffordability and inequality exists throughout the very most school communities and therefore policy which closes the gap that inequality creates must be done so by poverty proof framework which policymakers across the whole system follow.

By 2040, schools, boards of management and the Department of Education have realised the need for greater support for those students from marginalised backgrounds, understanding the importance and need for supporting them to have a strong sense of belonging, and providing more supports to these marginalised children and young people through transitioning periods from primary to post primary and from post primary to further education and training.

We applaud the work which is being done to create and host a national convention

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/circulars/measures-to-be-adopted-by-schools-to-reduce-the-cost-of-school-uniforms-and-other-costs/>

on education. SVP has a unique and unmatched insight as an organisation and research and policy facility. Because of our Members work, in all communities across Ireland we understand what households are experiencing today and through our research and policy team we not only understand the systemic barriers and policies which have developed over time to create the issues, but we also understand the solutions, which is key to our submission.