



The Real Cost of School in 2024

Back to School Survey – Summary

July 2024



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

“ A basic need and right of children shouldn't be crippling families across the nation in order to care for their educational wellbeing

— Secondary school parent



For 20 years Barnardos has highlighted the costs and pressures experienced by parents when preparing their children to go back to school each September. This year the survey was live from the 19th June to the 20th July inclusive. A total of over 900 responses were received. These responses represented the costs associated with 500 primary school pupils and 410 secondary school students. The costs examined in the survey comprise the basics required for returning to school, such as schoolbooks, school uniforms, classroom resources, digital technology and voluntary contributions, as well as school tours and trips.

Back to School Costs



Results from our survey continue to show that parents are concerned about meeting costs this summer. Half of primary (51%) and 70% of secondary school parents stated they are worried about meeting costs this year. 13% of primary school parents and 21% of secondary school parents said they were very concerned.

“ There is a constant worry of being able to keep up with the basic needs for my son to attend school.

– Primary school parent

Only 30% of secondary school parents said that costs were manageable. Six percent of secondary and one percent of primary school parents said they simply would not be able to meet costs.

Costs for parents – €	2024	2023
Uniforms		
Primary	€119	€117
Secondary	€211	€204
Voluntary contribution		
Primary	€98	€101
Secondary	€124	€143
Schoolbooks		
Primary	€0	€0
Secondary (Senior Cycle)	€202	€218
Classroom resources¹		
Primary	€51	€51
Secondary	€69	€71
School tours and trips		
Primary	€65	N/A
Secondary	€151	N/A
Extra-curricular activities within school²		
Primary	€87	N/A
Secondary	€113	N/A
Digital Costs		
Primary	€51	€48
Secondary	€168	€147

1. 14% of primary and 30% of secondary school parents said they did not have to contribute anything towards classroom resources

2. 30% of primary and 55% of secondary parents said they did not have pay for extra-curricular activities within school

Paying for Back to School Costs

“ We are struggling to meet increased mortgage and higher bills and groceries despite both working hard. Back to school means another loan for us.

– Secondary school parent

Families are under severe pressure and something needs to change, me along with many other parents are tired of financial struggles with constant bills on top of trying to educate our children.

– Secondary school parent



One quarter of secondary (25%) and almost one in five (18%) primary school parents said they have to use savings in order to meet back to school costs. Worryingly, more than one in five (21%) of secondary and one in ten (12%) of primary school parents said they had to take a loan out or borrow from friends to meet school costs. For some families it requires cutting back on other essential areas or simply not purchasing all required school items in advance of their children starting back.

“ It means we cannot afford any luxuries. I need to cut back on weekly shopping so I have the money for the school.

– Secondary school parent

“ Not able to afford to pay for everything before the kids go back to school and them being embarrassed by it.

– Primary school parent

No parent should face additional stress and financial pressure to ensure their child has all they need to start back to school. The Government has reduced some expenses but there is an opportunity to do more to reduce costs for parents. We address each area individually below.

Uniforms

On average, primary school parents spent €119 on uniforms and secondary school parents spent €211 this year. When asked about whether or not they were worried about meeting the cost of uniforms this year, 85% of primary school parents said they were worried (24% very worried) and 90% of secondary school parents expressed worry (39% were very worried). Only 15% (primary) and 10% (secondary) of parents said they were not worried at all. Most parents stated that uniforms are costly due to the requirement to purchase crested/branded uniforms.

“ I would like to see non crested uniforms that do not cost a small fortune

– Secondary school parent

“ No crested uniforms so we can buy the clothing in ordinary shops instead of paying a fortune

– Primary school parent



One of the growing issues for parents over recent years has been expansion of having to buy branded uniform as well as branded tracksuits and specific coats.

“ Have generic uniform and allow kids wear their own coat, my child was sent home twice for wearing her own coat when it rained, I couldn't afford the coat until the end of the school year and her and her older brother shared a coat over the winter.

– Secondary school parent

84% of secondary school and 78% of primary school parents said that their children's school did not offer an affordable uniform option. When asked if their school could do more to lower the cost of their child's uniform 73% of primary and 80% of secondary school parents said yes.

One quarter (25%) of parents completing the survey said that they receive the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. More than three quarters (76%) of them reported it did not cover the costs of uniform and footwear. A significant amount of parents suggested the threshold for receiving the allowance should be lowered, stating that they were struggling to meet school costs but weren't entitled to any state support, as their incomes were too high, or they were not in receipt of a state welfare payment. Many respondents suggested the allowance should be made a universal support.

“ Increase back to school - €160 is not enough for a primary school giving that the cost is €560 !! for everything.

– Primary school parent

“ Back to school allowance for ALL, similar to child benefit. With another child starting school in September, costs are doubling and it is not that easy to fund.

– Primary school parent



Schoolbooks and Classroom Resources

Barnardos welcomed the announcement of free schoolbooks to all primary school children in Budget 2023. Parents themselves repeatedly stated what a welcome measure it was, reducing pressure on them.

“ The free school books made a huge positive impact for me this last academic year and it was a very welcomed scheme. It made a very challenging time some what less challenging. I am very appreciative of it.

— Primary school parent



However, Barnardos would like to see this expanded until all children in school in the Republic of Ireland qualify to receive free schoolbooks. The average cost of schoolbooks in 2024 for senior cycle secondary school is €202. Parents consistently responded that the free schoolbook scheme should be extended to all secondary schools.

86% of primary and 70% of secondary school parents said they were asked to contribute towards classroom resources, where the average cost was €51 and €69 respectively for those who did.



Digital Tools

Overall, primary school parents spent €51 on average on digital costs while secondary school parents spent €168. Two in five (39%) secondary school parents who have to purchase digital devices for their children stated they had to pay over €300 for those digital costs.



“ Even though the books are free this year, we still have to pay €1,200 for a child starting secondary. This means we cannot afford a holiday this year. This impacts on the whole family’s mental health. Both parents in our household work and we are just meeting costs with no disposable income for a family holiday. It seems very unfair to be in this position.

— Secondary school parent



For many of the schools that do require digital tools, they request specific high end expensive items such as top of the range iPads. Parents are not given a choice to purchase more affordable alternatives. Parents said they need additional support meeting digital costs or else there must be affordable options put in place.

“ I could really do with help towards electronic devices that school has said we have to buy at a cost of €740.

— Secondary school parent

“ Any device should be allowed rather than being forced to purchase a school specific device.

— Secondary school parent

Voluntary Contributions

78% of primary and 80% of secondary school parents said that their schools requested a voluntary contribution at the start of the school year. The average amount asked for by schools was €98 for primary school parents and €124 for secondary school parents. The range of contributions varied considerably, with some schools requesting €20 from parents while others looked for over €300.

Almost two-thirds of parents (64%) said that it did not feel voluntary. Four in five secondary school parents (77%) and two thirds of primary school parents (68%) said that parents should not have to pay it.



“ Voluntary Contribution but they email to let you know that you still haven't paid it.

– Primary school parent

“ Pay the schools more directly so parents don't have to make up the shortfall.

– Secondary school parent

“ Honour their commitments, do not leave schools stranded and needing to rely on funding from the parents.

– Secondary school parent

School Tours and Extra-curricular Activities



96% of secondary and 99% primary school parents said they were asked to pay additional sums for school tours and trips. On average this was €151 for secondary and €65 for primary school. One quarter (25%) of secondary school parents saying they have to spend over €300 on school tours and trips.

“ I feel so guilty that I can't afford to send her on all the trips the others appear to go on easily so I feel she's missing out.

— Primary school parent

40% of secondary and 70% of primary school parents said they had to pay for extra-curricular activities within school. On average it was €87 for primary schools and €113 for secondary school parents.

“ Fund school trips and extra curricular activities that support their learning.

— Primary school parent

“ Our school puts on lots of extra curricular sports, music etc for the kids which is great, until you get the bill.

— Secondary school parent

Recommendations



1 End voluntary contributions

The Department of Education should increase capitation rates by 10% and establish a voluntary contribution code of practice which all schools must adhere to.



2 Free schoolbooks

Extend the free schoolbooks scheme to all secondary schools.



3 Affordable uniforms

The Department of Education must mandate all schools introduce an affordable uniform option.



4 Back to School Footwear and Clothing Allowance

Increase the Allowance by €100, as it was in Budget 2022 and Budget 2023, on a permanent basis.



5 Digital Costs

Explore establishing a digital tools fund for low income parents where their children are in schools requiring high cost digital items.

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960s, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support. Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, poor parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction.

Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.



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