



The Real Cost of School in 2026

Back to School Survey Report
August 2026


Barnardos
Because childhood lasts a lifetime



Back to School 2026

Introduction

Barnardos has been campaigning to reduce back to school costs in order to reduce financial pressure facing parents across the country for over 20 years. Over the past few years we have seen substantial progress such as the introduction of free schoolbooks to all school children, expansion of the hot school meals programme to all primary schools, and a significant increase to the capitation grant in Budgets 2025 and 2026. Collectively these have had significant positive impact on the financial pressures facing families.

"Free school meals are a godsend" (Primary school parent)

"The school book scheme is brilliant" (Primary school parent)

"I feel the costs have gone down in recent years with the books scheme and the school lunches being provided" (Primary school parent)

"We do have to manage our budget but now that books are paid for it's a huge burden lifted" (Secondary school parent)

However, parents remain concerned about several back to school costs, in particular for many secondary school parents the cost of digital devices and for primary school parents the issue of expensive uniforms, which often now include additional branded tracksuits. The Government needs to continue the progress made recently in order to provide a truly free education. Barnardos calls on the government to prioritise these steps:

- 1. Address the increasing cost of digital devices**
- 2. Make affordable uniform options mandatory across all schools**
- 3. Expand eligibility to back to school allowance**
- 4. Introduce voluntary contributions code of practice**



Methodology

Each year, Barnardos undertakes an online survey of parents to find out the costs they will incur for their child returning to education in September. A link to the survey is shared with the public and our supporters through various channels, primarily email and social media.

This year the survey was live from the 7th to the 31st July inclusive. A total of 704 responses were received, 455 primary school pupils and 249 secondary school students. The costs examined in the survey comprise uniforms, classroom resources, digital technology and voluntary contributions, as well as school tours and trips.

Demographics

Survey respondents came from a cross-section of Irish society, with a representative geographic spread, covering all counties across the country. Respondents covered all classes and years within the primary and secondary school cycles, with approximately one third in DEIS and two thirds in non-DEIS schools.

Back to school costs

Results from our survey continue to show that parents are concerned about meeting costs this year. More than half of all parents (60% of primary and 60% of secondary) stated they are worried about meeting these costs, (17% of primary school parents and 19% of secondary school parents said they were very concerned). Only one third (34%) of secondary school parents said that costs were manageable. Six percent of secondary and 2% of primary school parents said they simply would not be able to meet costs.

"Having four children in school and no reductions as both parents work and school costs are increasing so not all of the children will be able to fully participate"
(Secondary school parent)

"Not being able to cover costs" (Primary school parent)



"Worried that it will be too much" (Primary school parent)

"Deciding between paying household bills or covering school costs" (Secondary school parent)

"Fear of not been able to afford what he needs" (Secondary school parent)

Paying for back to school costs

Costs for parents ¹ – €	2026	2025
Uniforms		
Primary	€118	€125
Secondary	€203	€199
Voluntary contribution		
Primary	€83	€87
Secondary	€128	€133
Classroom resources²		
Primary	€49	€51
Secondary	€74	€74
School tours and trips		
Primary	€65	€64
Secondary	€162	€144
Extra-curricular activities within school³		
Primary	€91	€84
Secondary	€125	€110
Digital Costs⁴		
Primary	€81	€147
Secondary	€447	€430

¹ In producing our costed figures above, we combine costs parents tell us and produce the average amount spent on each item.

² 24% of primary and 32% of secondary school parents said they did not have to contribute anything towards classroom resources.

³ 29% of primary and 62% of secondary parents said they did not have pay for extra-curricular activities within school.

⁴ 57% of secondary and only 14% of primary school parents said that their schools required digital costs.



Just over one quarter of secondary (27%) and 21% primary school parents said they have to use savings in order to meet back to school costs. 15% of secondary and one in ten (9%) of primary school parents said they had to take a loan out or borrow from family and friends to meet school costs.

Parents spoke at length about concerns meeting back to school costs. Some detailed having to cut back or go without, most likely on essentials for themselves, in order to meet the costs. Others raised the problem of all the costs coming at once and not being in a good position to meet them.

"Too much comes at once, with very few options of instalments"
(Secondary school parent)

"Being able to get everything on time without having to go without something else" (Primary school parent)

"The volume of costs all in one go - uniform, school gear, shoes, admin fee, art and craft fee" (Primary school parent)

"All the expenditure comes together in August/ September"
(Secondary school parent)

"Finding the money and having to borrow" (Secondary school parent)

On top of some resorting to borrowing in order to meet costs, others spoke of the financial struggles they will have to endure for a few months after these costs, particularly for families on lower incomes who have not been in a position to try and put away money for these costs earlier in the year, due to insufficient income and general problems with cost of living increases.

"It can be hard to pay back loans" (Secondary school parent)

"It's a lot of extra money by the time you pay for everything"
(Primary school parent)

"What will I have to compromise" (Primary school parent)



"The amount of money it takes to get the children ready for returning to school, a few weeks of just getting by" (Secondary school parent)

"I worry every Summer about how I will fund everything. Difficulty this year is that secondary school is so expensive. Not entitled to BTS grant so trying to scrimp and save where I can" (Secondary school parent)

Below we set out costs for specific years within primary and secondary school.

Costs for parents 2026 - €	4th class	1st year	5th year
Uniforms	€123	€230	€210
School trips and tours	€70	€155	€136
Digital tools*	€233	€490	€430
Classroom resources*	€56	€67	€75
Voluntary contributions*	€71	€137	€156
Extra-curricular activities in school	€122	€161	€119

* Average amount of those who were asked to pay digital costs, classroom resources, extra-curricular activities and voluntary contributions this year. Very few primary school parents were required to pay for digital devices.



Uniforms

On average, primary school parents spent €118 on uniforms and secondary school parents spent €203 this year⁵. Two thirds (65%) of primary school parents said they were somewhat or very worried (11% very worried) about meeting the cost of uniforms this year and 78% of secondary school parents expressed worry (19% were very worried).

79% of primary school and 94% of secondary school parents said their children had to wear crested/branded uniforms. Only 11% of primary and 2% of secondary school parents said their children had plain uniforms and 11% (primary)/ 5% (secondary) said their child had no uniform. Less than one third (30%) of primary and 9% of secondary school parents said their school offered an affordable uniform option. Nine in ten (89%) primary and 92% secondary school parents said they believed that their school should provide an affordable uniform option.

As with most previous years, one of the greatest frustrations with parents around cost of going back to school was the price of uniforms and in particular not being allowed to buy generic non-crested/branded uniforms. Additionally, many felt, in particular primary school parents, that it was unreasonable having to buy both a branded uniform and a branded tracksuit.

"The twins have double everything to get and crested uniforms are a joke as they cost so much. I've one starting secondary school and her uniform costs are a scandal" (Secondary school parent)

"The cost of the uniform is outrageous. They should be allowed to wear the tracksuit all the time; the only option should be affordable" (Primary school parent)

⁵ 70% of primary school parents and three quarters (74%) of secondary school parents, felt costs had gone up from last year. 28% of primary and 21% of secondary school parents said the amount had stayed the same.



"Branded uniforms are so expensive and completely unnecessary"
(Primary school parent)

*"Needlessly purchasing two school uniforms – the tracksuit and the formal uniform
– let's just have the tracksuit"* (Primary school parent)

Numerous parents discussed having to buy multiples of each as children would get them dirty or quickly outgrow them.

"The uniforms are expensive and we need so many of them to keep them in clean ones. My son's school doesn't allow the alternative of wearing plain tracksuits from supermarket etc which makes the cost really high as the uniforms are sold as a whole unit and I can't split the tops and bottoms, I need to buy the whole tracksuit opposed to 2 jumpers and 4 bottoms" (Primary school parent)

"Cost of uniform very expensive, especially as you need to buy a couple of each item as they get dirty so quickly" (Primary school parent)

For parents in secondary school an issue raised frequently was that some children were having to wear adult sizes adding to costs. In general, many parents thought their schools could be doing more to make them affordable.

"Shoes alone can cost me €100 for my child, uniforms can only be bought from one particular shop and are crested and not the common colours"
(Secondary school parent)

"The price of the uniform, last year it was 100 euro a tracksuit and because my child has sensory issues we need to buy 3 of them that's 300 with shoes or t-shirts that's simply just a crested jumper and tracksuit bottoms" (Primary school parent)

Some parents mentioned positive actions their schools had introduced such as second-hand swaps and the like, but this was still in the minority.

"Our school parents' association runs a second-hand uniform sale and we get some hand-me-downs – these both help a great deal" (Secondary school parent)



The Solution

– Affordable uniforms

The Department of Education has provided a Circular setting out the need for schools to have affordable uniform options. Additionally, last year the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) issued guidance in June warning schools not to engage in anti-competitive practices in relation to uniforms. However, it appears that far too many are ignoring this guidance as well as the Department's circular. The Department should introduce an affordable uniform charter for schools to sign up to that would amalgamate and build on existing best practice and sustainable programmes, helping schools learn from each other.

Digital Tools

For secondary schools, 43% of parents said they didn't have to pay anything for digital costs. 35% said they had to pay for a laptop, 13% a tablet and 15% an iPad (some parents had to pay for more than one device for their child). For parents that have a child in a school requiring digital tools the average cost was €447, with 61% saying they had to pay more than €500.

86% percent of primary school parents said their children were not required to have a tablet, laptop or iPad. Five percent said their children required a tablet and 2% laptop. Of the 14% who were required to pay for digital devices, the average cost was €81.

The prices some parents are compelled to spend on digital costs is extremely high, particularly if they have numerous children requiring them. Parents suggested that some schools were out of touch with reality and the general cost of living issue within the country.

"Being asked to pay €850 for a tablet is disgraceful when people are struggling to pay their electricity bill and put food on the table. School has no understanding of



current cost of living crisis and how families are struggling. Tablet was compulsory!! Absolutely disgraceful" (Secondary school parent)

"Uniforms are already expensive but this year they have added in a laptop €750. We have forfeited going on a family holiday this year due to the extra costs, next year will be the same as we have to buy the laptop for our other child. You don't want the child to be different by not having what the school is asking for"
(Secondary school parent)

There are many instances across the country of parents being compelled to buy specific devices from specific suppliers at set costs. They are not allowed to shop around to get better value, use similar cheaper items, or even use identical devices that they already own. We have been informed that this is happening frequently without any consultation with parents.

The Solution

There is a risk that some parents are facing difficult financial decisions and considerable sacrifices to afford these digital devices or that children are stigmatised for not being able to afford the mandated device. There is deep concern about the impact this may have on educational inequality, something the Department has repeatedly committed to prioritising, as shown in the recent DEIS Plus model that has been introduced.

No parent should face financial hardship as a result of these costs. No child should be educationally disadvantaged. The Department of Education must further investigate the use of these devices across schools through an official review; how many mandate expensive items, and explore piloting a digital tools fund for low income parents. A fund must be established for children in schools that require digital devices, to start with those in receipt of back to school clothing and footwear allowance.

Back to School Allowance

The Department of Social Protection provides support to help with the cost of sending children to school through the Back to School Clothing and Footwear



Allowance (BSCFA). This allowance is available to families on a low income such as those in receipt of a social welfare payment (including Working Family Payment) or taking part in approved employment schemes and recognised education and training courses.

One quarter (24%) of primary and 22% of secondary school parents said they received the back to school allowance. 72% of secondary and 73% of primary school parents said it does not cover the cost of uniform and footwear through the year.

"It's just worries me back to school clothing don't cover everything for me as my daughter needs to wear special shoes and they cost a lot of money"
(Primary school parent)

In recent years, more and more parents have raised their frustration of receiving little to no support when meeting back to school costs. The most frequent complaint is not being beneficiaries of the back to school allowance because they don't quite meet thresholds. For some, they feel as though they are being punished. Some parents recommended it becoming a universal benefit or provided staggered support for costs so it's not a situation whereby you receive the full amount of the allowance or nothing.

"My biggest concern is that the cost of food, clothing, school supplies and activities keeps increasing, yet many hardworking families fall just above the income threshold and receive no Back to School Allowance. Missing out because your income is only a few euros over the limit feels deeply unfair, especially when those families still struggle with the real cost of raising children. The current system creates a benefits cliff instead of providing gradual support. Assistance should taper off based on income rather than stop completely, so that working families are not penalised for earning slightly more" (Primary school parent)

"Multiple children, middle income so no supports, back to school should be for all, like Children's Benefit" (Primary school parent)



"We don't receive any government support financially, making it harder each year especially with 3 children attending school. We rely on family and friends to pass down old uniforms" (Primary school parent)

"Being able to afford it. Don't meet threshold for the grant and struggle every summer" (Secondary school parent)

The Solution

Amend the thresholds for qualifying for the Allowance to allow more families who are currently struggling financially but not entitled to it, due to having slightly too high-income levels.

Voluntary Contributions and fundraising

More than four in five (81%) primary and secondary school parents said that their schools requested a voluntary contribution. The average amount asked for by schools was €83 for primary school parents and €128 for secondary school parents. Two thirds of primary (67%) and 69% of secondary school parents said the payment did not feel voluntary. Three quarters (76%) of secondary school parents and three quarters of primary school parents (72%) said that parents should not have to pay it.

The increases to the capitation rate for schools in Budget 2025 and 2026 were very welcome. Over time this may help schools reduce their reliance on voluntary contributions. However, parents still complained about the method through which contributions were requested and repeated asks for contributions to be paid.

Continuing a trend that began last year, again this year a significant number of parents raised the fact that there are often continual additional expenses that come up during the course of the year, some of them voluntary and some of them not, related to fundraising for the school. Even with the ones that were voluntary, parents felt a compulsion to pay. This was primarily an issue for primary school parents.



"The payment appears on the app until its unpaid, I don't think that's right. They get funding for school books and workbooks. They do a lot of fundraising throughout the year, non-uniform days, bake sales, jersey days. I can afford it but it really concerns me that they are asking everybody for money and for many parents who have multiple children they just don't have it and nor should they"

(Primary school parent)

"Costs spiral throughout the year with additional asks e.g. school hats, music groups! This payment is a constant on the 'app' but pressuring. Additional asks for hats or initiatives where it develops as fundraising EVERY FRIDAY is too much. green day, purple pants day, friendly Friday, school calendar, school raffle, cake sale, teacher presents, 5 school play dates at Christmas and also in the summer.

Initiatives with good intention to help others, often set by people that unintentionally pressure those sometimes most in need and impact negatively via their constant need to 'do good'" (Primary school parent)

"Also the regular 'encouragement' to contribute to Parents Association fundraisers eg school lotto, minimum is €10 per month, so €120 per year, which covers items including eg gifts for teachers, cakes for different celebratory events at school" (Primary school parent)

"The emails and notifications for money never stop it's weekly

(Primary school parent)

The Solution

In Budget 2025 and 2026 there was a welcome increase to the capitation rate. The Department of Education should continue increasing the rate over the course of this Government to restore it to pre-2010 levels, considering inflation levels, helping to appropriately fund schools, so that they do not require additional income from parents.

Establish a voluntary contribution code of practice which sets out that all schools must publish where the funds go; guaranteed voluntary contribution fees for school essentials such as lockers, journals and access to book rental scheme; follow up or reminders for the payment of voluntary contributions can never be



sent through a child; lists of parents who have and have not paid voluntary contributions must be kept anonymised.

Classroom Resources

76% of primary and 68% of secondary school parents said they had to contribute towards classroom resources at an average of €74 for secondary school and €49 for primary schools. The main complaint raised about classroom resources by parents was that they often had little understanding about what exactly it covered and if there was any overlap with voluntary contributions.

School Tours and Trips

A significant number of parents this year raised the issue of having to pay for school tours and additional extra-curricular activities in school for their children, and highlighted that these costs could come up suddenly and be required to be paid almost immediately. 98% of primary and 97% of secondary school parents said they were asked to pay additional sums for school tours and trips. On average this was €162 for secondary and €65 for primary school.

38% of secondary and 64% of primary school parents said they had to pay for extra-curricular activities within school. On average it was €91 for primary schools and €125 for secondary school parents. Parents spoke about how these costs can add up quickly. Similar to unexpected costs in relation to school fundraising, there was a concern around school activities and days out, feeling a compulsion to pay or otherwise their child might miss out.

"Unexpected costs throughout the year such as trips, after school activities like swimming, music" (Primary school parent)

"There is never a clear idea of the whole year costs, so you end up getting money requests throughout the year" (Primary school parent)

"The cost of buses for school trips/tours and school matches can be a lot especially when all together over a couple of weeks at the end of the year"
(Secondary school parent)



Conclusion and Recommendations

Barnardos believes that no parent should face financial pressures and struggles in trying to meet what are essential costs for their children's education.

1. Digital Costs

Review how schools require parents to purchase digital devices, the options they are given and establish a pilot fund for low income families to access devices when they are mandatory to engage within school.

2. Affordable uniforms

Mandate all schools have an affordable uniform option, set below the back to school clothing and footwear allowance.

3. Back to School Footwear and Clothing Allowance

Amend the threshold for qualifying for the Allowance, to allow more families who are struggling financially to benefit from it and reduce pressure on them.

4. End voluntary contributions

Continue increasing capitation rates and introduce a voluntary contribution code of practice.

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, 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, 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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