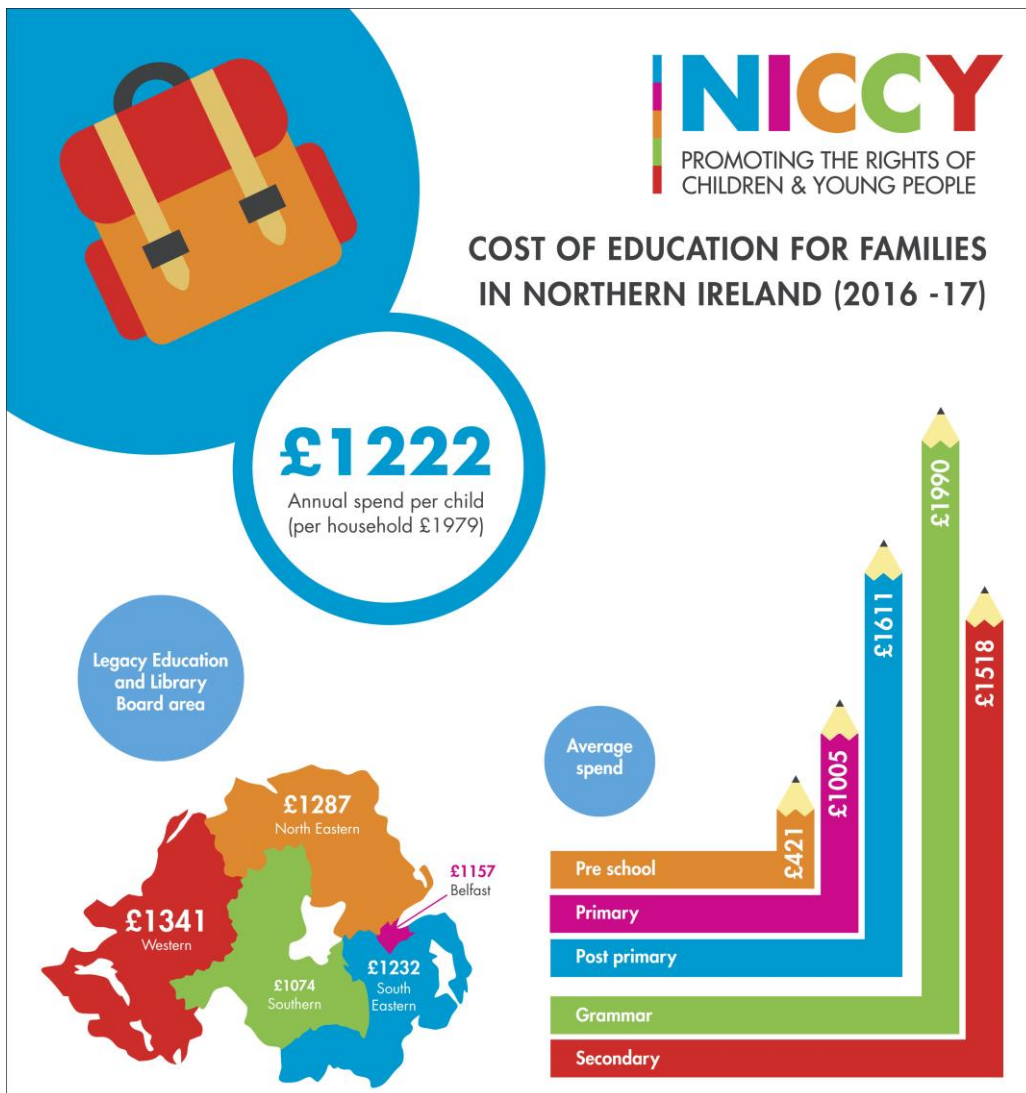


'A 'free' education?

The cost of education in Northern Ireland



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1. Introduction

The Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with ‘The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order’ (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Article 6(1) of the Order establishes the Commissioner’s principal aim as, “...to *safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young persons.*”

Under Articles 7(2) and (3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. Under Article 7(4), NICCY has a statutory duty to advise any relevant authority on matters concerning the rights or best interests of children and young persons.

The Commissioner’s remit includes children and young people from birth up to 18 years, or 21 years, if the young person is disabled or in the care of social services. In carrying out her functions, the Commissioner’s paramount consideration is the rights of the child or young person, having particular regard to their wishes and feelings. In exercising her functions, the Commissioner has regard to all relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The Commissioner has legislative powers which allow for research to be undertaken or commissioned which concerns the rights or best interests of children and young people¹ and to be published.²

Educational inequalities and costs of education

Two of the Commissioner’s priority areas are child poverty and education. Through NICCY’s ongoing engagement with children and young people on these subject areas, the issue of the costs associated with education has been consistently raised. Young people and parents have told NICCY that the costs associated with education is impacting on their ability to fully participate in their education.

¹ Article 8(1) The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003

² Article 8(5)(c) The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003

There is clear evidence that there are marked inequalities with regard to attainment in education with specific groups of children and young people being more likely to do better.³ The Department of Education has identified groups at particular risk of underachieving, these include looked after children, Traveller children; children from ethnic minorities; children with a disability, children with additional needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds (such as children on free school meals).⁴ NICCY has also identified other groups of children who experience educational disadvantage⁵ and has recommended to Government that educational inequalities must be comprehensively addressed. NICCY wishes to see Government taking positive action and investing sufficient resources in order to mitigate against the adverse impacts of children's particular circumstances on their enjoyment of and achievement in education.

NICCY is aware that research on the costs associated with education and the impact of meeting these costs on the educational experience of children and young people does exist. The literature shows that living in poverty greatly exacerbates the impact of these costs.^{6 7 8} Most of the related research examines the impact of the costs of education on families who are living in poverty, however as research shows, the face of poverty in Northern Ireland is changing and that there is a marked increase in the number of people who are now in 'working poverty'. In Northern Ireland in-work poverty now accounts for 45% of income poverty.⁹ The use of food banks has also hit a record high. In 2016-17, The Trussell Trust provided 32,780 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, with a total of 13,717 parcels going to children in Northern Ireland.¹⁰ The Trussell Trust has stated that the majority of food bank usage in Northern Ireland is related to families and people on low incomes.¹¹ Despite this, there has been no attempt by Government, to further examine the impacts of poverty on education, to address these; nor are there any significant responsive policy initiatives on the horizon.

³ Educational Inequalities and Inclusion Paper, NICCY, July 2017.

⁴ Appendix 1, Priorities for Youth Consultation Document, Department of Education, consultation closed 10th December 2012.

⁵ *Op cit* 3.

⁶ NASUWT The Teachers Union, *The Costs of Education 2013/14*, NASUWT, Birmingham, 2014.

⁷ G Horgan, *Speaking Out Against Poverty: voices of children living in disadvantaged areas*, University of Ulster, Save The Children, Belfast, 2009.

⁸ G Horgan, *Child Poverty and Education*, Child Poverty Alliance, *Beneath the Surface Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*, CPA, Belfast, 2014.

⁹ New Policy Institute for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion*, 2016

¹⁰ Early Warnings: Universal Credit and Foodbanks, *The Trussell Trust*, 25th April 2017.

¹¹ <http://www.itv.com/news/utv/2017-04-26/stark-figures-show-record-high-in-ni-food-bank-usage/>

For many children, access to critical educational opportunities and key entitlements are based on their parents' ability to pay. There is an increasing disparity between schools not only in terms of what provision is offered, but also how much it costs to access this provision, and this is increasing inequality. This changing nature of poverty and related Governmental policy responses with regard to the availability of financial assistance to meet the costs associated with education for all who require help in the current Northern Ireland context is an area which NICCY believes requires examination.

2. Children's right to education – International Standards

The UNCRC places obligations on State Parties with regard to the provision of education. Article 28 of the Convention states that,

“States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

- (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;*
- (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need...”* (Our emphasis)

The Convention also provides clarity on what is meant by, ‘education’. Article 29(1) states that education shall be directed to, *“The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential...”*

According to the UNCRC Committee's General Comment on Article 29, education must be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering.¹² The goal is to strengthen the child's capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights, to promote a culture which is infused by appropriate human rights values and to empower the child through developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence. In this context, ‘education’ goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, whether individually or collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society.

In its 2016 examination of the UK Government's compliance with its obligations under the UNCRC, the Committee made a number of relevant recommendations. With regard to the allocation of resources and the reduction of inequalities the Committee recommended that,

“In accordance with article 4 of the Convention and Sustainable Development Goal 10, Targets 10.2 and 10.4, the Committee urges the State party to allocate the maximum

¹² General Comment No.1: Aims of Education, UN Doc CRC/GC/2001

extent of available resources for the implementation of children's rights, with a special focus on eradicating child poverty and reducing inequalities within and across all jurisdictions."¹³

With regard to the costs of education the Committee recommended that,

*"...the State party ensure that its international development cooperation supports the recipient States in guaranteeing the right to free compulsory primary education for all, by prioritizing free and quality primary education in public schools, refraining from funding for-profit private schools, and facilitating registration and regulation of private schools."*¹⁴

Article 2 of the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights as incorporated by the Human Rights Act 1998 also provides that no one shall be denied the right to education. This has been interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights to mean that every child is entitled to access *effective* education. Moreover, taken together with Article 14 ECHR - the non-discrimination principle - the right to access available educational facilities must be secured to all children without discrimination.

Further, under Article 2 of the UNCRC, each Member State undertakes to ensure Convention rights to every child without discrimination on any ground. All children are therefore entitled to equal access to education regardless of their social origin or status, their geographical location, their membership of a linguistic, ethnic or other minority, their detention or their disability. Similarly, Article 1 of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention Against Discrimination in Education prohibits,

*"...any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education"*¹⁵

¹³ Para 12, CRC/C/GBR/CO/5, 3rd June 2016

¹⁴ Para 17, *Ibid.*

¹⁵ UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education 1960, 14th December 1960

The Views of Young People and Parents on the Costs of Education

A number of the participants in NICCY's Your Voice Matters Project commented on the costs of their education and the impact that these costs were having on their lives in school. They said,

*"You need to have the right clothes for non uniform day or I just wouldn't go in. I just went in my uniform last time and said I forgot"*¹⁶

*"There's no need to have such expensive blazers and everything. I got an honours blazer but couldn't get it cause it was too dear – they should just give you a badge instead."*¹⁷

*"The tracksuit alone is over £40. There's no need to have a school tracksuit unless you're on a team or something."*¹⁸

Some of the parents who participated in NICCY's survey commented on the costs of education, highlighting a range of views. Many stated that there should be more Government funding provided for schools in order to meet the costs of education. They said,

"You're already paying taxes to pay for education and yet you have to pay so much extra for basic educational needs"

"Wages do not rise but everyday costs do."

"More Government money needs to be available."

"It's vital to all children so it should be given all the funding needed and not just for those at the bottom."

"I worry as a single parent how I will pay when they reach secondary school."

"Costs for dinners and transport for paying parents are too high."

¹⁶ Your Voice Matters Because You Matter, Fieldwork Report, NICCY, December 2015.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

3. Public expenditure on education across the UK

Each year, the Treasury reports on how public money is allocated across the UK,¹⁹ using World Bank expenditure categories. One of the categories reported on is education, and spending is broken down by a number of sub-categories,²⁰ which allows us to compare how education budgets are spent across the UK.

According to the HM Treasury Report ‘Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2017’ the budget for education in Northern Ireland in 2016-17 was £2.7 billion, a considerable proportion of the overall DEL²¹ budget. When broken down by spending per school-age child, this spending was largely in line with that in England and Wales, although spending per child in Scotland was 31.5% higher than in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: Public expenditure on education 2016-17²²

	Total education spending (£millions)	Total education spending per school age child (£)	% higher spend per child than in NI
Northern Ireland	2,706	7,477	0
England	69,349	7,099	-5%
Scotland	7,899	9,831	31%
Wales	4,091	7,772	4%

Despite largely similar allocation to the education budget in Northern Ireland in comparison to other parts of the UK, as can be seen from the following tables, the proportion of this allocated specifically to preschool, primary and secondary education is considerably higher in other regions than in Northern Ireland.

¹⁹ HM Treasury (July 2017), Public Expenditure: Statistical Analyses 2017, (London: Treasury).

²⁰ The sub-categories under Education are Pre-primary and primary education, Secondary education, Post-secondary non-tertiary education, Tertiary education, Education not definable by level, Subsidiary services to education, R&D education and Education n.e.c.

²¹ DEL refers to departmental expenditure limits and refers to departmental budgets or the amount that government departments have been allocated to spend.

²² Public expenditure data from HM Treasury (July 2017), Public Expenditure: Statistical Analyses 2017, (London: Treasury). Population statistics for school-age children drawn from ONS ‘Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland’ mid-year estimates for 2016. Please note that estimates were calculated on the basis that ‘school age’ (including pre-school) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was ages 3-17, and 3-16 in Scotland.

Table 2: Public expenditure on preschool, primary and secondary education²³

	Total expenditure (£millions)	Total spending per child (£)	% higher spend per child than in NI
Northern Ireland	1,813	5,009	0
England	57,784	5,915	18
Scotland	5,870	7,305	46
Wales	3,456	6,565	31

Spending on preschool, primary and secondary education in England is 18% higher, in Wales is 31% higher and in Scotland is 46% higher.

This pattern of expenditure is not consistent across all the spending sub-categories. There is considerably higher expenditure per child in Northern Ireland than other parts of the UK in relation to the following expenditure categories: ‘Subsidiary services to education’ and ‘Education n.e.c.’²⁴ According to the Department of Education, some of the areas of spend included under ‘Subsidiary services to education’ are home to school transport; school meals and milk; schools development services; pupil support (special schools and other education services); and other Education Authority centre services. ‘Education n.e.c.’ includes special schools; Non-Departmental Public Bodies (e.g. Education Authority, CCEA, CCMS, GTCNI, CnaG, NICIE, Middletown); capital (minor works, major works, special schools); departmental costs; and grants for education services.²⁵

Table 4: Public expenditure on ‘Subsidiary services’ and ‘Education n.e.c.’²⁶

	Total expenditure (£millions)	Total spending per child (£)	% lower spend per child than in NI
Northern Ireland	478	1,320.71	0
England	5,591	572.33	-56.7%
Scotland	480	597.38	-54.8%
Wales	151	286.86	-78.3%

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Education n.e.c. means expenditure on education that is not elsewhere classified.

²⁵ The World Bank defines this category as ‘Administration, operation or support of activities such as formulation, administration, coordination and monitoring of overall educational policies, plans, programmes and budgets; preparation and enforcement of legislation and standards for the provision of education, including licensing of educational establishments; production and dissemination of general information, technical documentation and statistics on education.

²⁶ *Ibid*

This data clearly shows that, while there is similar spending per child on education in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK (excluding Scotland), considerably less of this is allocated to schools, and considerably more to 'subsidiary services' and other education spending i.e. n.e.c.

Current Government Financial Assistance in Education

Free school meals (FSM) provide targeted support to families on low incomes. They are aimed at those children deemed to be most in need of additional help and are provided to ensure that eligible children have access to a meal which is suitable as the main meal of the day. FSME is an indicator of social deprivation and is highly correlated with lower levels of educational attainment. The Department of Education uses FSME as a proxy measure for deprivation to allow analysis of outcomes for students from different socio-economic backgrounds. There have been a number of changes to FSM eligibility criteria over recent years with the policy intention and effect of widening entitlement.²⁷

Grants to help with buying school uniforms for certain categories of pupils are also available with the eligibility criteria similar to those used for free school meals. The current eligibility criteria for free school meals and uniform grants are based on the applicant being in receipt of certain welfare benefits and tax credits that have already been means tested by the Department for Communities and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Approximately 98,000 pupils in Northern Ireland receive a uniform grant. Primary school pupils can receive a grant of £35.75 towards their school uniform, post-primary and special school pupils can receive £51 if they are under 15 years old and £56 if they are over 15. Post-primary and special school pupils can also receive £22 towards paying for school PE kit.

Under the Department of Education's **Common Funding Scheme**, additional funding is allocated to schools for specific groups of children, including newcomer children, Traveller and Roma children, looked after children and children who are free school meal entitled (FSME).²⁸ There are no requirements on schools in Northern Ireland to account for this funding or to prove that this funding is being spent on improving the educational outcomes of this group of pupils. There is therefore no way of knowing if the additional money allocated to schools to improve the educational outcomes of pupils who are FSME is

²⁷ Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme, Sir Robert Salisbury, Chair, January 2013.

²⁸ Common Funding Scheme 2015 – 2016, Department of Education.

having the desired or indeed, any impact. NICCY has concerns that this funding may be being spent by schools to plug gaps in general school funding and not for the purpose for which it was intended. This is not the case in England where schools are under a statutory obligation²⁹ to publish their 'pupil premium strategy' on their website with information including how they will spend the additional funding allocated for disadvantaged pupils and measure impact, as well as information on how the previous academic year's allocation was spent and its impact on the educational attainment of disadvantaged pupils.³⁰

Children over the age of 4 in Northern Ireland may also qualify for free home to school transport if there is no suitable school within two miles for primary school pupils and three miles for post-primary pupils.

The Department of Education provides funding under its Extended Schools Programme for schools in relatively disadvantaged areas. This allows schools to access some extra money to provide breakfast and homework clubs, summer schemes and parenting support. Just over £10.6 million was provided to around 400 schools in 2016-17 under the Extended Schools Programme and the department of Education is proposing to cut this by approximately £1.5 million in 2017/18.³¹

4. The cost of education to families in Northern Ireland

In February 2017, NICCY commissioned a survey of parents across Northern Ireland, to identify the amount parents are having to spend in relation to the education of their children, and how affordable these costs are. The survey is based on a representative sample of 1,006 parents across Northern Ireland. Parents were interviewed in their own homes on a face-to-face basis. Fieldwork was undertaken between 7 March and 10 May 2017. The key findings of the survey are outlined below.³²

²⁹ School Information (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012.

³⁰ While FSME is thought to be the best proxy measure currently available evidence indicates that it is an imperfect measure of deprivation and some literature, including the 2013 Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme, recommends continuing to investigate possible alternatives - House of Commons Library Briefing Number 6700, School funding: Pupil Premium, 21 November 2016.

³¹ 6th July 2017, BBC News NI, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-40506586>.

³² The full report of the survey can be found here - <http://www.niccy.org/costofeducation>

Total Cost of Education

On average parents spent £1222.30 per child on education in the previous year;

Parents spent an average of £421.21 on pre-school children, £1004.64 on primary school children and £1611.31 on children attending post primary schools;

Parents with children attending controlled schools spent an average of £1286.14 per child (Catholic maintained, £1131.55: integrated, £1292.71);

Parents with children attending secondary schools spent an average of £1517.85 per child with the average spend on a child attending a grammar school, £1989.70;

Parents and households in the legacy Western Education and Library Board area recorded the highest average annual cost (£1341.29 per child and £2390.47 per household), whereas parents in the Southern Education and Library Board area recorded the lowest average cost (£1073.50 per child and £1679.23 per household);

On average households³³ spent £1979.18 on education costs in the last year;

Proportionate Spend by Item

School meals and snacks accounted for 52% of all education expenditure, with transport accounting for 15% and school uniforms 9%;

School Uniforms

On average parents spent £109.39 per child on school uniforms in the previous year, or an average of £176.68 per household;

4% of all children in the survey purchased school uniform from schools directly, 49% from particular suppliers, 22% from both schools and suppliers, with 25% free to use any supplier;

Among children required to purchase school uniforms from schools or particular suppliers, 71% were required to purchase all or most items from these sources;

³³ For the purpose of NICCY's survey on the Costs of Education, a household is one with 1.6 school age children. This is based on a representative survey of 1006 parents with 1620 school age children.

PE Clothing, Footwear and Equipment

On average parents spent £53.69 per child on PE clothing, footwear and equipment in the previous year, or an average of £84.29 per household;

4% of all children in the survey purchased PE related gear from schools directly, 31% from particular suppliers, 17% from both schools and suppliers, with 48% free to use any supplier;

Among children required to purchase PE gear from schools or particular suppliers, 71% were required to purchase all or most items from these sources;

Equipment for Lessons

On average parents spent £52.38 per child on equipment for lessons in the previous year, or an average of £84.53 per household;

Among all children in the survey, 76% had purchased a school bag in the last year, with 69% purchasing pens / pencils and 58% other stationery;

Transport Costs

22% of all children in the survey were entitled to free school transport;

On average parents spent £11.06 a week per child on transport, or an average of £16.32 per household;

On average parents spent £431.34 per child annually on transport, or an average of £563.86 per household;

School Meals

29% of all children in the survey were entitled to free school meals;

42% of children in the survey took a school dinner, 33% a packed lunch, 7% bought lunch away from the school, 3% had lunch at home, and 15% sometimes had lunches or school dinners;

On average parents spent £3.06 a day per child on school meals, or an average of £4.72 per household;

The annual average cost of school meals for a child was estimated at £596.12, or an average of £920.61 per household;

Snacks and Drinks

On average parents spent £1.58 a day per child on snacks and drinks, or an average of £2.43 per household;

The annual average cost of snacks for a child was estimated at £308.71, or £474.58 per household;

School Fees and Voluntary Contributions

7% of all children in the survey paid school fees, with 30% asked to make a voluntary contribution to their school;

Parents who had spent money on school fees and / or voluntary contributions spent an average of £59.59 a year per child, or an average of £73.56 per household;

29% of children in the survey attend schools where there is a requirement to pay a voluntary contribution, with 33% of their parents feeling under a lot or some pressure to pay the contribution;

Educational Visits

65% of children in the survey had paid for educational visits / class outings in the last year;

Those who had spent money on educational visits / class outings spent an average of £21.29 per child in the last year, or an average of £30.19 per household;

6% of children were unable to take part in educational visits / class outings in the last year due to cost;

Additional Trips and Holidays

41% of children attend schools that organise additional, optional trips or holidays, that are not a class or subject trip;

39% of children had paid for additional trips and holidays at their school;

On average additional trips and holidays cost £249.61 per child in the last year, with households spending an average of £348.10 on these trips in the last year;

7% of children were unable to take part in additional trips or holidays in the last year due to cost;

Charitable Donations

80% of children in the survey had made charitable donations, contributions for non-uniform days or sponsored activities in the last year;

Among those who had made charitable donations in the last year, the average cost per child was £10.42, or £17.37 per household;

Before / After / Optional School Activities

34% of children in the survey pay for before / after / optional school activities on a weekly basis;

Among those who had paid for before / after / optional school activities, the average weekly cost per child was £8.91, or £13.34 per household;

Homework Costs

36% of all children in the survey needed computer equipment, printers, access to the internet etc., to enable them to complete their homework in the last year;

Among those who needed computer equipment etc. for their homework, the average cost per child was £77.42, or £103.03 per household;

School Fundraising Events

62% of children attended schools that held social fundraising events for pupils and/or parents in the last year;

Among those who indicated that their child's (ren's) school ran fundraising events in the last year, the average cost per child was £12.97, or £21.61 per household;

Special Educational Needs

7% of all children in the survey have special educational needs;

Parents with children with special needs spent an average of £295 per child on additional items and activities relating to their child's special educational needs, or an average of £364.41 per household;

Extra Tuition

5% of children in the survey incurred expenditure on extra tuition in the last year;

Among those who had spent money on extra tuition in the last year, the average annual spend was £281.67 per child, or £364.41 per household;

Communication with Schools

25% of parents said they knew beforehand roughly how much it would cost to send their child (ren) to school [75% were unaware];

6% of parents said that cost was a factor affecting their choice of school for their child (ren);

21% of parents said they would be comfortable approaching their child's school for financial help if they were struggling to pay the costs associated with sending them to the school [62% said they would be uncomfortable];

Impact of Education Costs

20% of parents agreed with the statement *'My family has had to go without other things to pay for school costs'* [75% disagreed];

30% of parents agreed with the statement *'I worry about finding/affording the money to cover the costs of sending my child (ren) to school'* [65% disagreed];

5% of parents reported getting into debt to pay their children's education costs, with family the most common source of loan funding (58%);

2% of parents had used a payday loan service to pay for their child's (ren) education costs;

34% of parents said there are more school costs at particular times of the year, with 60% of these parents most commonly citing September / first term / start of the school year;

Awareness that Schools Get Additional Funding for Children Entitled to Free School Meals

23% of parents were aware that, when a child is entitled to free school meals, the government also provides their school with additional funding;

57% of parents were supportive of making some of the additional funding (available to schools when child is entitled to free school meals) available to cover some of the child's school costs that the parents are normally asked to cover;

Parental Expectations Regarding the Cost of Education in the Last Year

On being provided with an estimate of how much they had spent on education in the previous year at the end of the survey, 40% of parents felt the figure was more than they had expected, with 56% saying it was about what they had expected and 4% said it was less than they had expected;

58% of parents believed that the cost of education estimated in the survey was 'about right', with 41% saying it was 'too much' and 1% saying it was 'too little'.

5. Recommendations

There is a strong correlation between economic disadvantage and educational disadvantage. This is exacerbated by financial pressure placed on families by the additional costs of education. While children are supposed to be provided with a free school place, this is not the reality. All children should have access to a free education and adequate financial assistance should be available where this is required in line with the obligations on Government under Article 28 of the UNCRC.

1. The Northern Ireland Executive, Department of Education and Education Authority should ensure that schools are adequately funded solely through public expenditure, and should not rely on parents and guardians to pay for the shortfall in the costs of their children's education.
2. The Department of Education should provide more information on the money currently allocated to 'subsidiary services to education' and 'education n.e.c.' More of

the funding allocated for education in Northern Ireland should be spent on direct education provision for children. A larger proportion of the education budget should be directed to schools so that they are not dependent on parents to provide funding.

3. The Northern Ireland Executive should make a renewed commitment to addressing the educational underachievement of socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people. There should be increased investment in the education of children in poverty and adequate support provided to ensure that barriers to succeeding in education can be overcome. Uniform and PE kit grant rates should cover the entire cost incurred by parents with children at all stages in their education, including nursery level, and proposals to cut extended school funding should be immediately withdrawn.
4. The Department of Education should require all schools to take a 'common sense' approach to their school uniform policy. Uniform requirements should be revised so that parents can purchase school uniforms from the most affordable sources.
5. The additional funding allocated to schools under the Department of Education's Common Funding Scheme for specific groups of children, including children who are FSME, must be spent by schools on improving the educational outcomes of these children. The Department of Education should introduce a statutory requirement on schools to account for this funding, including demonstrating how it will be spent and what impact it is having. This funding should meet the individual needs of each child and could include the costs of school uniforms, books, equipment, materials and educational trips.
6. The Department of Education should ensure that the additional costs of education incurred by children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are met through statutory funding. All children should be able to fulfil their maximum potential in education and this should not be based on their ability to pay.
7. The practice of charging school fees or requesting voluntary contributions is discriminating against those who do not have the means to pay and must end immediately. All grant-aided schools should be accessible to all children in Northern Ireland, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances. In the short term, schools should be clear and transparent about these charges and improve communication with parents. Schools should also take immediate action to prevent parents from

feeling uncomfortable about approaching them to discuss their concerns about meeting these costs and take all steps to assist parents with these costs.

8. Given the large proportion of the costs of education attributed to school transport and food for children in school, the Northern Ireland Executive should provide greater financial assistance to alleviate these costs. Access to free school meals and free home to school transport should be widened to ease the financial burden on families.
9. The Northern Ireland Executive must ensure an end to the duplication of spend on the administration of the various education sectors in Northern Ireland. The focus of the provision of education within restricted budgets must be on ensuring that all children receive an education in line with Article 29(1) of the UNCRC and fulfil their maximum potential. Education should therefore focus on the development of the skills, talents and abilities of children as well as formal schooling. Educational trips, before, after and optional school activities should be available to all children free of charge and not based on the ability to pay.

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