

THE COST OF HAVING FUN AT SCHOOL

MARCH 2022

ABRIDGED VERSION FOR CHARITIES

"There is nothing for free. If you can't pay for special occasions, you can't go." (Pupil, age 6)



Poverty Proofing

**THE COST OF
THE SCHOOL DAY**

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Overview

This is an abridged version of *The Cost of Having Fun at School* report. In this version, we have included the findings and recommendations that would be most relevant to charities that are reflecting on their own approach to engaging pupils in their work and fundraising in schools.

The quotes and experiences captured in this report are taken from our work with **32 schools across England, Scotland and Wales** through Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and Children North East's UK Cost of the School Day project. It highlights what we've heard from focus groups with over **8,000 pupils** as well as the views of parents and carers.

The findings are supported by wider ongoing work being carried out by Children North East through their Poverty Proofing© the School Day project, which has worked with 390 schools in England reaching 170,890 pupils. The report also draws on insights from CPAG's Cost of the School Day project in Scotland.

Bringing together this research and expertise, CPAG and Children North East seek to shine an important spotlight on the often-hidden school costs that prevent children from poorer backgrounds being able to make the most of school life.

When speaking to children and young people across England, Scotland and Wales about the impact of poverty on the school day, **stories of children missing out on fun and special activities and events because of the associated costs and pressures are common.**

For many children, events, celebrations and special activities are some of the things they remember most about their time at school. We know that many pupils look forward to these activities and gain a lot from them, and that's why they are an important part of the school year. However, for some children, **these days and events draw attention to their families' financial circumstances**, and are a frequent and unwelcome reminder that, unlike their peers, they are not able to join in with all the opportunities school has to offer.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Through our research, we've gathered ideas and suggestions from pupils and families about how things can be done differently. We've also learned from good practice in schools and this paper helps to highlight these insights and provide practical recommendations for charities.

Of course, school communities alone cannot eradicate child poverty or prevent the impact poverty has on children. For more information about the causes of child poverty and the wider changes that are needed to end child poverty, see cpag.org.uk/child-poverty.

Introduction

Background on school-related costs

Although education across the UK is seemingly ‘free’ to access, we know that many children and families find it challenging to manage the many costs associated with going to school. This can have a knock-on effect on children’s experiences of school life and their outcomes.

Our research with whole-school communities across Britain shows that things like uniforms, trips, school lunches, P.E. kits, stationery, devices and subject costs can be difficult to afford for low-income families. However, in this report we look particularly at the **frequent and recurring costs and challenges associated with fun events at school**, as these have come up as a common theme in our research.

While school-related costs have always been a challenge for low-income families, the **rising cost of living and the recent £20 cut to universal credit are all contributing to family worries and hardship**. Families should not have to worry about the cost of fun events at school on top of everything else.

Fun events in school

Pupils and parents have shared the many ways in which school activities **like charity days, fundraising events, non-uniform days, school fayres, special occasions and leavers' celebrations** come with a range of **hidden costs and demands** on families that often can’t be met, leaving some children unable to participate and feeling noticeably different from their peers.

For low-income families, fun at school comes with requests for money, costumes and material donations, which can add up to significant amounts across the school year and contribute to the financial challenges many families are facing.

Importantly, we know schools are working hard to offer a wide range of fun and engaging opportunities for pupils to enhance their time at school. The exclusion experienced by pupils and families at school is almost always unintentional. Many children and families living in low-income households also go to great lengths to hide their financial disadvantage, and this can mean schools are unaware of the impact fun events are having on them. However, it’s clear from our research that even one-off small requests can pose difficulties for struggling families, and in many schools across Britain, these build up and are a common feature of school life.

Our research also highlights **ideas pupils and families have suggested that can help make fun events more inclusive**, as well as describing the approaches they have identified as working well for them in their school. **Many schools are finding creative and alternative ways to celebrate occasions and charity days** without burdening children and families with unnecessary costs. We’ve highlighted a number of these throughout the paper to help spark ideas and share good practice.

Our aim

CPAG and Children North East hope that this report will enable charities working across the UK to better understand how certain events and activities at school can negatively impact some children. By working together and listening to children and their families, we can ensure that fun events at school can be enjoyed by everyone. As people working in schools and with schools, we have a responsibility to our children to **make sure that no part of schooling is out of reach because of family income**, and this crucially includes all the wonderful, fun activities that we know children love.

Summary of key findings

This page sets out the key findings from Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East's research into fun events at school, drawing on work carried out with pupils and families in schools across England, Scotland and Wales.

1 School fundraising and charity days are adding to financial pressures on families.

Some pupils and families who are themselves struggling to get by are being asked to regularly donate to different charity and fundraising days at school, and this is contributing to financial worries.

"Sometimes it feels like quite a lot of money is being asked for. I can't do it if it's lots of times. We have to pay for more important things first." (Parent)

2 Not everyone is able to take part and enjoy dress up days and non-uniform days.

Children and young people reported being unable to take part in school dress up days and non-uniform days because of associated costs and social pressures. They told us this sometimes made them feel embarrassed and left out. In some cases, teachers reported that pupils were missing school on these days to avoid these pressures.

"They talk behind your back [about what you wear] and stand staring at you." (Pupil, age 12)

Key recommendations

For charities

1. Raise awareness within the organisation of the challenges fundraising in schools can present for pupils and families on a low income and ensure this informs and is an active part of considerations being made when planning fundraising activities in schools.

2. Consider how any materials, information and communications linked to fundraising in schools can demonstrate awareness and understanding of the financial pressures children and families might be facing. For example, focusing primarily on how pupils can engage and connect with the cause, and presenting a range of ways to support the cause with raising money just being one option.

See pages 16-17 for more detailed guidance.

Fundraising at school

Charity and fundraising days at school can be an important way for children to learn about social causes and help raise money to tackle issues that affect people. Schools often fundraise for local charities, as well as taking part in well-known national fundraising days. These days can help to nurture compassion and raise awareness of the world around pupils – including their own communities. Fundraising days and events may also be organised by parent bodies (eg, PTAs and parent councils) to help raise important funds for the school and increase opportunities for pupils. Many children look forward to these days and enjoy the opportunity to take part.

"[Donating and bringing in food for Harvest] was a good way to help people." (Pupil, age 16)

Requests for cash and donations

However, pupils and families have told us that household income affects how lots of children experience these days, often with negative consequences for children in poorer families.



First, these days regularly involve direct requests for cash. While many schools use more discreet systems for parents to pay for things like lunches, trips and clubs, when charity events and fundraising activities occur, children and young people are often required to bring in physical money. Children reported that donations for charity and fundraising days are often collected in front of them in classrooms by teachers or other pupils, making it obvious which of their peers have made a donation.

"You would know if someone didn't have money. Everyone stands up and the teacher goes round for money and they sit down." (Pupil, age 10)

"I do notice sometimes there are the same people who don't pay each time." (Pupil, age 11)

"A record is kept of who has brought in money." (Pupil, age 13)



Fundraising at school

Buying items and merchandise

As well as it being noticeable which pupils aren't able to donate, children have told us they are aware of their friends missing out on certain fundraising activities, such as bake sales and buying products like poppies and red noses, because money is required in order for them to take part.

"You don't have to buy one [a red nose], but I feel sad for the people who can't afford it." (Pupil, age 9)

"Some people cried because they didn't get one. They just sat there looking at the cakes. They looked sad." (Pupil, age 10)

"Some people can't get them [poppies] and some others can. Some people might feel left out." (Primary school pupil)

"Year 6 do cake day. Some children have lots of siblings and 50p for cake is a lot if there are lots of siblings." (Primary school pupil)

Timing and notice periods

Children and families have often commented on the frequency of fundraising days and activities. They have reported that sometimes these occasions are too close together, and they aren't given enough notice about what's coming up. This can be stressful for families who don't want their children to miss out but simply can't meet the continuous requests. Parents also noted that there are certain times of year that can be more difficult, like the lead-up to Christmas.

"Sometimes it feels like quite a lot of money is being asked for. I can't do it if it's lots of times. We have to pay for more important things first." (Parent)

"I don't want my child to feel like she's missing out on anything, but I know that a lot of the 'demands' are unnecessary." (Parent)

"I feel quite stressed and anxious with the constant letters we have from school in the build up to Christmas." (Parent)



Fundraising at school

Lack of understanding about family circumstances

What's more, some of the families who are being asked to donate and fundraise for charities and the school are themselves receiving charitable support, such as using school food and clothing banks. **Child poverty affects more than one in four children across the UK**, and many more families with children are struggling to get by due to the rising cost of living and recent cuts to the social security system.

While promoting charitable causes is important, **it's crucial that schools and charities are not burdening struggling families with fundraising requests** which may further contribute to their hardship. We know this can also lead to families feeling that their school lacks understanding about the challenges they face or the realities of living on a low income – and this can impact how families choose to engage with their school.

"There is little awareness of what it's like to live on a very tight income." (Parent)

"It felt like they weren't interested and that we were on our own. If it's smallish amounts of money I don't raise it as they don't seem to understand." (Parent)

"Despite raising awareness of the cost of the school day we are constantly being asked for money for photos, Christmas cards and gifts, charities etc. and many parents then feel compelled to give to ensure their child is not singled out." (Parent)

During the school year, there are often a variety of fundraising events for different purposes and with different aims. For example, some fundraising activities aim to support a charity while others aim to raise money for the school itself.

Some parents talked specifically about requests for money that come from the PTA, parent council, or other parent groups. These parent bodies commonly coordinate a range of activities and events with an aim to raise money so the school can offer pupils additional opportunities – for example, subsidising school trips, school clubs and putting on discos. However, parents told us they sometimes feel pressured to contribute to these events and, although they want to help, this can be a significant challenge. Parents also commented that although they are often being asked for voluntary donations, sometimes it does not feel voluntary because of the way the information is communicated.

"Not everyone doesn't mind how much things cost just cos it's for the kid's school." (Parent)



Fundraising at school



Being poverty aware

Conversely, our research shows that families really notice when schools do things to take the pressure off and show an understanding of the challenges families face. Parents appreciate schools being poverty aware and told us that this is often demonstrated through the schools' communications, policies and practices.

"Haven't needed to yet [help paying for school costs] as school very aware of hardship in community and does all it can to make easier for those less fortunate without it being obvious to others. As teachers/head teacher themselves very approachable, if I get to dire straits (and hope not), I wouldn't have problems going to them for help for my child." (Parent)

"Getting children involved in the work of charities at an early age is a great way of showing them how these organisations make a difference in the world, and how they can be a part of it. With school-age children, it's about trying to involve every child in some way and look at the opportunities to create new and fun ways to make giving and fundraising more inclusive. It's worth taking time to research the school and speak to the teachers about their students to help identify the kinds of activities that would work best to show them how they can be involved in non-financial ways."

Charlotte Sherman, Chartered Institute of Fundraising



Ideas and reflections from pupils and parents

Some pupils talked positively about donation systems where you can throw money in a bucket, and also felt more things should be free at school.

"It's pretty anonymous [at my school]. Nobody needs to know if you have or you haven't [donated]." (Pupil, age 12)

"It didn't matter if you didn't bring money because we took a bucket to collect money." (Pupil, age 10)

"I think they should do things for free." (Primary school pupil)

"There's no pressure to donate. They're sending e-newsletters now with just giving link. I think they should keep that going after covid." (Parent)

Fundraising at school

What works well

An alternative way to mark Remembrance Day: one school's new approach

One school recently changed their approach to charity days and fundraising. This year, there was no expectation to buy poppies and instead pupils told us they wrote poems and made crosses with poppies, and that everything was provided by the school. When collecting donations for charity days pupils and staff described how money was handed in discreetly in envelopes:

"We tweaked it a little bit, put their donation into an envelope, we are not stating it has to be a pound, just a donation, you don't even need to bring a donation, everyone is going to join in regardless." (Teacher)

Although this change started as a Covid-related measure, one of the unintended yet positive consequences of this is that **"nobody knows how much you are taking in."** (Pupil, age 10)

"I think that helped a lot because then there is not that pressure around how much people are bringing in." (Teacher)

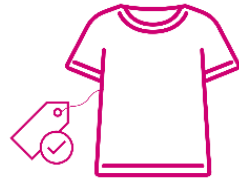


Dressing up days and non-uniform days

Dressing up for different themed days can be a fun way to celebrate learning and add variety to the school calendar. Along with non-uniform days, we know many children look forward to dressing up days and enjoy planning outfits.

Having the right outfit

However, as well as the direct requests for money on these days, there are also a number of financial implications associated with taking part. Commonly, dressing up days and non-uniform days can create increased anxieties and cost pressures for some pupils and their parents. On dressing up days, pupils told us that they are often asked to wear specific items for different occasions, e.g. polka dots for Children in Need, red clothes for Red Nose Day, literary outfits for World Book Day and a festive jumper for Christmas Jumper Day.



Pupils noted that it can be difficult to find clothes for the occasion and some had to buy outfits especially for the day. Pupils were also aware of other children who were unable to take part in these occasions. They noticed that they stood out, and were often left out, for this reason. Parents also shared examples of schools that were hosting multiple different dress up days in one half term and have spoken about the minimal notice that is given to prepare outfits, which can be stressful for all parents but particularly those without much money.

"Yes [I have struggled with costs], there have been dress up days where having to buy different items has been an unnecessary expense, especially when you have more than 1 child." (Parent)

"If you don't pay on muffi, you have to change into spare uniform." (Pupil, age 11)

"I didn't have a costume, so didn't get to take part but could go with the class." (Pupil, age 9)

Dressing up days and non-uniform days

Embarrassment and shame

Children also suggested that dressing up days and non-uniform days can lead to pupils being picked on and feeling embarrassed because they can't afford the right clothes. Some pupils highlighted that non-uniform days can sometimes be an opportunity for children to show off the clothes they have and this highlights inequalities between pupils.

"They talk behind your back [about what you wear] and stand staring at you." (Pupil, age 12)

"[Your friends might say] you should have dressed up as something else." (Pupil, age 8)

"Some people might be embarrassed by their costume or might not have enough money." (Pupil, age 9)

"They feel frustrated and don't want to talk the rest of the day... they feel uncomfortable." (Pupil, age 10)

"Some people ask why you don't have a Christmas jumper." (Pupil, age 10)

Impact on attendance

Worryingly, our evidence shows that in some schools attendance dips on non-uniform days and dressing up days, and this is supported by evidence elsewhere.¹ This highlights the significance of the cost and social pressures on children. While most would imagine these days to be a source of enjoyment, in some cases they are in fact harming the education of pupils through increased absences.

"Children will take the day off on days where St David's Day costumes need to be worn or other days when uniform isn't required." (Staff member)

¹ [Open data project for schools Christmas jumper day attendance](#), ASCL, 2018

Dressing up days and non-uniform days



Ideas and reflections from pupils

"I would change like all the non-uniform days because people get asked if that's the only clothes they have....It makes them feel upset and disappointed." (Pupil, age 10)

"We used to stand up and show our costumes [for World Book Day]... now [we decorate potatoes instead] it's better, cos we're not using plastic which is destroying our world." (Pupil, age 8)

"Could design a t-shirt or jumper in school instead [of dress up days]?" (Primary school pupil)

"Maybe [instead of buying Christmas jumpers] if you had a normal plain jumper, a white one, you could do crafty things, you can decorate your own jumper, an old t-shirt you don't use anymore." (Primary school pupil)

"Could have a stall and people can bring in old Christmas jumpers. They'd be big and small so people could come up and say they need one. I think we've done that before." (Primary school pupil)

"Instead of everyone buying a jumper to wear, we could make Christmas cards instead." (Primary school pupil)

School insight: monitoring non-uniform days

One school informally monitored attendance during non-uniform days and identified several pupils, mainly pupils with English as an additional language, who were not attending school on these days. They have since changed these days to 'dress as you please'. Pupils said this was good as they could **"wear school trousers and any home top they liked."** (Pupil, age 9). Senior management noted that since introducing this, attendance has improved.

Dressing up days and non-uniform days

What works well



World Book Day without the cost pressures on families: Downfield Primary School's creative approach

Downfield Primary School in Dundee set up two bell-style reading tents during the week leading up to World Book Day, stocked with lots of exciting titles for children to dip into during break time and lunch hour. Inside the tents there was plenty of room to get comfy on cushions and hang out with friends while a roster of specially-invited guests (parents!) hosted special reading sessions. At the end of the week, the school organised a book swap, open to everyone. Pupils didn't have to bring a book to swap – it was open to all to come along and find something new to enjoy.



Guidance

Based on the findings from this research, CPAG and Children North East have developed guidance on approaches that charities can take to ensure having fun at school is inclusive of all pupils and can be enjoyed by everyone. We have also highlighted some practical top tips that we know can make a positive difference to pupil and family experiences of these activities.

We'd love to hear from charities who have ideas, suggestions or examples of how to ensure fundraising in schools is inclusive for all. We will continue to share good practice examples and ideas to support those thinking about this issue. Contact UKcosd@cpag.org.uk to share your ideas and examples.

Guidance for charities

Charities can play an important role in making sure that fundraising activities in schools are enjoyed by everyone and don't unintentionally exclude or further disadvantage pupils and families that might be struggling. We encourage charities to consider these approaches and use them to help guide future work in this area.

- 1** Raise awareness within your organisation of the challenges fundraising in schools can present for pupils and families on a low income and ensure this informs and is an active part of considerations being made when planning fundraising activities in schools.
- 2** Consider how any materials, information and communications linked to fundraising in schools can **demonstrate awareness and understanding of the financial pressures children and families might be facing**. For example, focusing primarily on how pupils can engage and connect with the cause, and presenting a range of ways to support the cause with raising money just being one option.
- 3** Design and promote activities for schools that every pupil can take part in and **make that a key focus**, with any ask for donations as secondary and discreet. For example, pupils could write a letter to their MP, make a poster or postcard, run an assembly or sign a petition.

- 4** Certain times of year can be particularly expensive for families, such as the end of term, the back-to-school period and the lead-up to Christmas. How can you make sure your charity isn't asking families to fundraise around these periods?

Top tip: Provide schools with a range of options and activities about how to engage pupils with your charity's work, allowing schools to make decisions about what will work best for their school community.

Top tip: Through your communications and interactions with pupils, **be sure to thank them for their time, ideas and enthusiasm**, rather than championing those who made donations or raised money.

Top tip: Encourage schools through your materials and messaging to give families plenty of notice about any forthcoming activities to avoid putting unnecessary pressures on pupils and parents.

Charities can also work with Children North East's *Poverty Proofing@ Charities* service. Poverty Proofing@ Charities engages and consults with charity staff, senior leaders, and communities about their purpose, aims, and the systems they work in, in an effort to alleviate poverty. Poverty Proofing@ Charities encourages charities to reflect on their impact as an organisation, with a focus on eliminating inequalities of accessibility for those experiencing poverty. Contact info@povertyproofing.co.uk for more information.

About us

About Child Poverty Action Group

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high-profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. Registered charity numbers: 294841 and SC039339

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About Children North East

Children North East exists because growing up can be hard. We create life-changing differences for babies, Children and young people in their families, schools and communities. We offer support at those times when a little help can make a big difference for a child and their future. Ultimately, our purpose is that all North East babies, children and young people grow up to be healthy and happy, regardless of background or family circumstance. Whether it is in their family, at school or in their local community, we are here to support children, young people and their parents in the North East and beyond. Charity number: 222041

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About UK Cost of the School Day

The Cost of the School Day project was started by CPAG in Scotland in 2014 with the aim of reducing the financial barriers that prevent pupils from fully participating in the school day. The Cost of the School Day approach involves working with whole-school communities (pupils, parents, teachers and school staff) to identify and reduce cost barriers faced by pupils from low-income backgrounds. Following the success of this project in Glasgow and Dundee, CPAG has partnered with Children North East and expanded the project to local authorities in England, Wales and new parts of Scotland. This project is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Pears Foundation, Orbit Housing Association, Coventry City Council and the Royal Borough of Greenwich who we thank for their ongoing support. cpag.org.uk/CoSD

About Poverty Proofing© the School Day

Poverty Proofing© the School Day is a project developed by Children North East. The project provides a toolkit to poverty proof the school day, to reduce stigma and remove barriers to learning and to assist schools in exploring the most effective way to spend school funding provided for those eligible for Free School Meals. Poverty Proofing © the School Day consists of an audit for each individual school, questioning pupils, staff, parents and governors. The result is an action plan tailored to each individual school to address any stigmatising policies or practices. There is then the opportunity to be awarded an accreditation following a review visit. We also offer training to staff and governors on poverty and its impact on education.