

THE COSTS OF EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF AUSTERITY: A LOCAL STUDY

MAY 2019

Mariann Dosa
with Oxford and District
Action on Child Poverty



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The Oxford and District Action on Child Poverty group works to raise awareness of child poverty in the local area and inform policy making that affects low-income families and children.

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It does not 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. If you are not already supporting us, please consider making a donation, or ask for details of our membership schemes, training courses and publications.

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The logo for Child Poverty Action Group is a bright pink parallelogram tilted to the right. Inside the shape, the words "CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP" are written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters, stacked vertically.

**CHILD
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GROUP**

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FOREWORD

Children should have equal advantages and opportunities for health, happiness and education wherever they grow up.

However, insufficient household income can mean that some children and young people do not have the resources needed for school and cannot easily afford to participate in school activities that have a cost. Worryingly, a recent trend has shown the problem getting worse as schools request donations from families to plug existing funding gaps and cover the very basics. With an average of nine children in every class of 30 living below the UK's poverty line, these costs and requests create increased financial pressure on families who cannot afford to contribute – and should not have to. Small-scale studies like this are crucial in shining a light on our seemingly 'free' education system, demonstrating the many aspects of school life that come with a cost. By investigating these costs and bringing them to public attention, we can help policy makers devise ways of ensuring, and not just assuming, that all aspects of education are universally accessible.

Alison Garnham
Chief Executive, Child Poverty Action Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a small-scale, local study of the costs of education in secondary schools in Oxford, from the viewpoint of parents.

The research was conducted by the Oxford and District Action on Child Poverty group, whose goals were: to assess the costs of education for children in secondary schools in Oxford; to find out how families perceived these costs and their impact, and if and how they managed to cover them; and to learn what schools had done to respond to the impact of these costs on families and the outcomes of their responses. The focus was on pupils in year 7 in secondary school.

The research was primarily based on an online survey asking parents about certain costs related to their child's education; how easy or difficult it was for them to meet these costs; and what forms of support were available in their child's school to cover these costs. The specific costs we were looking at included school clothing and uniform, school meals, transport, school trips and other items. Sixty-four parents responded to the survey in total and, in addition to these responses, we interviewed six parents in person or via the telephone and the headteacher of each of the three schools on which the survey focused.

Our findings suggest that the idea of a free education in Oxford, and in England in general, is far from the reality. Low-income families are likely to be under-represented in our study, but nonetheless many respondents reported having difficulty in meeting school costs. Our research also shows that parents want the best for their children and many make sacrifices to ensure that they do not miss out on opportunities or feel excluded. At the same time, many parents feel pressured to make 'voluntary' contributions towards school costs.

We also examined the context of child poverty and the costs of school in England in general and Oxford in particular and found that the insufficient and unpredictable funding schools receive from the government puts great pressure on them to fill the gaps in their budgets and that this is a key reason why parents are faced with increasing costs. And these costs occur at a time when many families' resources are being severely curtailed by rapidly increasing rents and when government support for low-income families is being cut significantly and/or frozen in cash terms.

In addition, we studied the broader policy environment in which schools, and academies in particular, operate in Oxford, with a specific focus on policies relating to the pupil premium and families' access to support. Our study found that schools do have some choice in using pupil premium funds and it is a matter of school policy whether they spend these funds on interventions that solely benefit pupils eligible for the pupil premium or on interventions that raise the attainment level of all disadvantaged children in the school, including those who are eligible. And these school-level policies can have a crucial impact on pupils' school experience, as some of those children who do not qualify for the pupil premium, but whose parents may still find it difficult to afford the costs of additional activities or materials, may be left out.

Eligibility for support, or the lack thereof, was another overarching theme identified in our research. Many parents indicated that, even though they were struggling to pay for school costs, they were not eligible for statutory support. As a result, some felt resentment at the fact that others received support while they were also struggling to make ends meet and making sacrifices.

Lastly, another key finding of our study is that many parents lack information on available support towards school costs. Many indicated that they were not aware of existing help, and we found little information on the schools' websites about what support they offer towards school costs and how parents can access this.

Based on these findings, the report makes recommendations for tackling these issues at three different levels: national government, local education authorities and academy trusts, and secondary schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

- Increase school funding in real terms on a per pupil basis.¹
- Ensure that pupil premium funding is protected in real terms.²
- Introduce measures that tackle parents' unemployment, low pay and increasing housing costs. End the freeze on working-age benefits, including child benefit, restore their real value and increase them in line with inflation.
- Introduce automatic registration of eligible pupils for free school meals, and therefore also the pupil premium.³
- Issue and widely publicise clear guidelines about how schools can ask for voluntary contributions.⁴
- Issue clear government guidelines/statutory requirements on spending the pupil premium, including information provided by schools for parents about it, and ensure effective monitoring of how individual schools conform to these guidelines and requirements.

- Reissue the government guidance on school uniform to ensure that all schools are aware of it and remind them of their responsibilities in relation to the affordability and availability of school uniform.⁵
- Make the guidance on school uniform statutory, and thus legally binding, and make cost the top priority.⁶
- Explore the possibility of capping the cost of school uniforms.⁷
- Reissue the 2015 school food standards, and ensure that all schools are aware of these standards and enforce them in practice.
- Promote poverty awareness training for teaching, administrative and pastoral staff in schools. Possible models include: CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day training; Oxfam's training for job centre staff based on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach;⁸ ATD Fourth World's Social Worker Training Programme;⁹ and a training package currently being developed by the Educational Institute of Scotland.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES AND ACADEMY TRUSTS

- Encourage schools to have a clear, written, accessible policy outlining inclusive approaches to school trips, school meals, uniform and school activities, and potentially draft these policies for schools.
- Encourage schools to have a clear, written, well-publicised policy on using pupil premium funding. Make this policy an integral part of the wider school development plan, not a stand-alone item.
- Promote anti-bullying policies that are alert to poverty-based bullying and stigma.
- Promote and support projects that identify and address unnecessary school day costs that create a barrier to education for many children. Both Children North East and CPAG have developed approaches that reduce stigma in schools and remove barriers to learning through a school auditing process that results in a tailored action plan for schools.¹¹
- Promote poverty awareness training for teaching, administrative and pastoral staff in schools (see examples above).
- Consult CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day Toolkit and Dundee report¹² to further understand the impact school day costs have on children from low-income families and how these can be addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- Have a clear, written and well-publicised policy on available help with school costs in both online and off-line formats.
- Involve pupils and parents in the development of school-level policies – eg, on charging, using pupil premium funding and available support.
- Set eligibility criteria for school-level support in a flexible way, based on families' actual circumstances. Introduce gradation of support and ensure that parents are aware of the help available and the eligibility criteria.
- If the school has a uniform, keep uniform requirements simple and easy to access.
- Ensure pupils are not punished for not wearing uniform or not bringing any additionally required equipment to school. Seek and offer real solutions instead, such as support towards costs.
- Administer subsidies and second-hand support (eg, for uniform, clothes and arts equipment) in a way that avoids stigma.
- Plan the school year with affordability in mind, spacing events and activities so that larger costs do not coincide.¹³ Publicise all larger costs that parents will be expected to meet (especially school trips) at the beginning of the year/term (or even before that for year 7 pupils).
- Provide and publicise opportunities for paying in instalments with due notice.
- Keep the costs of school trips and other extracurricular activities reasonable, so that pupils from low-income families are not excluded. For example, consider activities led by school staff or volunteers, consider camping as an inexpensive residential opportunity, visit sites locally, reach out to local voluntary organisations that can offer to lead some activities, search for the cheapest provider and do not involve a commercial intermediary agent.¹⁴
- Provide the staple ingredients for cookery classes, especially where only a small quantity is needed.
- Publicise help available from local and national charities, where applicable.
- Consult CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day Toolkit for information and resources on how to facilitate conversations about school day costs with pupils, school staff and parents.

- Engage with projects that identify and address unnecessary school day costs that create a barrier to education for many children (see examples above).

Notes

1. See Fair Education Alliance, *Report Card 2016/17*, 2017, available at: www.faireducation.org.uk/publications
2. T Fellows and M Barton, *Spotlight on Disadvantage: the role and impact of governing boards in spending, monitoring and evaluating the pupil premium*, National Governance Association, 2018
3. Fair Education Alliance, *Report Card 2016/17*, 2017, available at: www.faireducation.org.uk
4. See guidance on charging and remissions policies issued by the National Governance Association at www.nga.org.uk
5. The Children's Commission on Poverty, *The Wrong Blazer: time for action on school uniform costs*, The Children's Society, 2015, available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/The-Wrong-Blazer_-_Time-for-action-on-school-uniform-costs_-_The-Children%27s-Commission-on-Poverty_The-Children%27s-Society.pdf
6. The Children's Commission on Poverty, *The Wrong Blazer: time for action on school uniform costs*, The Children's Society, 2015, available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/The-Wrong-Blazer_-_Time-for-action-on-school-uniform-costs_-_The-Children%27s-Commission-on-Poverty_The-Children%27s-Society.pdf
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8. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/community-assets-first-the-implications-of-the-sustainable-livelihoods-approach-145256>
9. <https://atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/social-work-training-programme>
10. www.eis.org.uk/Child-Poverty/PovertyPack
11. www.children-ne.org.uk/nine-things-schools-can-do-to-start-poverty-proofing; www.povertyproofing.co.uk
12. www.cpag.org.uk/content/cost-school-day-toolkit; www.cpag.org.uk/content/cost-school-day-dundee
13. S Spencer, *The Cost of the School Day*, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, 2015, available at: www.cpag.org.uk/cost-school-day
14. See specific examples and more detailed advice in S Spencer, *The Cost of the School Day*, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, 2015, available at: www.cpag.org.uk/cost-school-day

ONE INTRODUCTION

There is increasing evidence about the effects of poverty on pupils' lived experience in school.

In a study conducted by the Children's Commission on Poverty,¹ large numbers of children from low-income families said they not only fell behind academically but also were subjected to humiliation, embarrassment and bullying because of their family's poverty.²

'How children experience school is determined by the level of disadvantage they face.'³ Children often lack important childhood possessions and are short of everyday essentials. Their opportunities at school can be restricted because of their family's inability to pay for resources as essential as study guides. They worry about the inadequacy of their family's income.⁴ The costs of the supposedly free education in England can not only exacerbate the attainment gap between children from better- and worse-off families, but also have a lasting effect on pupils' general wellbeing and aspirations. Nevertheless, 'children spend a large proportion of their daily lives in the school environment and it is one of the key areas where intervention to improve the lives of low-income and disadvantaged children is possible.'⁵

Having acknowledged these alarming issues in the British education system, the Oxford and District Action on Child Poverty group decided to conduct research to get a better understanding of these problems in the local Oxford context. This initiative was planned to update a similar study the group had carried out, which was published by CPAG in 2003.⁶

Our goals were threefold. Firstly, we wanted to measure the costs of education for children in secondary schools in Oxford, in particular for those in their first year.⁷ Secondly, we wanted to find out how families perceived these costs and their impact, and if and how they managed to cover them. Lastly, we wanted to learn what schools had done to respond to the impact of these costs on families and the outcomes of their responses.

We designed a survey that asked parents about: certain costs related to their child's education (clothing and uniform, school meals, travel to school, school

trips and additional items); how easy or difficult it was for them to meet these costs; and what forms of support were available in their child's school to cover these costs. Due to the limited resources available for this research, we selected three secondary schools in Oxford where we conducted the survey. We approached schools to which members of the group had access. All three were academies, as every secondary school in Oxford has converted to an academy in the past few years. Each school is part of a multi-academy trust. We focused on year 7 as it is the first year of secondary school, which means that parents have to buy a lot of new items for school (such as uniforms, shoes and stationery). Therefore, this year can demonstrate the depth of difficulties parents are faced with concerning the costs of education and how they try to cope with them.

We sent the online version of this survey to the three selected schools, who sent it to the parents of pupils in year 7 via email. The email contained information about the aims of the study and the conditions of participation, including matters of confidentiality, anonymity and data protection, as well as the prospective uses of the study. Sixty-four parents responded to the survey in total. In addition to the survey, we interviewed six parents in person or via the telephone (some of those who indicated in the survey their willingness to be interviewed), as well as the headteacher of each school. It is important to note that the survey was conducted at the beginning of the year, which is likely to have affected parents' experiences of the costs of school for that particular year (particular trips, for instance, rather than uniform).

Our aims were to explore parents' and pupils' experiences in the local context to gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties that the costs of education may cause to families, and whether and how they manage to cover these costs, and to get a clearer picture of how schools had responded to the impact of these costs on families. It is very likely that low-income families are under-represented in this research, for a variety of reasons. The shame of poverty often makes people less willing to disclose their experiences.⁸ Trying to make ends meet consumes a lot of time and energy, which leaves people living in poverty less able to participate in unpaid activities. And lastly, most of the data on which this study is based was collected online, which means that people with good access to computers, tablets, smartphones and the internet were probably more likely to respond.

In what follows, we first introduce the broader context of child poverty in England and its effects on pupils' educational experiences and attainment, as well as the policy environment in which secondary schools, and academies in particular, operate in Oxford. Then we present the findings of our study and draw conclusions from these findings about the effects of the costs of education on families' daily lives in Oxford. In the final section of the report, we make recommendations for tackling these issues at three different levels: the national government,⁹ local education authorities and academy trusts, and secondary schools themselves.

Notes

1. The Children's Commission on Poverty was set up by The Children's Society to investigate and expose the real impact that poverty has on children's lives. Sixteen children aged 10–19 from across the country came together to run a comprehensive inquiry into the costs of school and the reality of school life for children in poverty. See www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/the-childrens-commission-on-poverty
2. The Children's Commission on Poverty, *Through Young Eyes: At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life*, The Children's Society, 2014, available at: <http://childrenscommission.org.uk/report>
3. G Horgan, *The Impact of Poverty on Young Children's Experience of School*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007, available at: www.jrf.org.uk/report/impact-poverty-young-childrens-experience-school
4. F Bennett, *The Impact of Poverty on Children's Experiences of Education*, Presentation to PGCE students, Department of Education, University of Oxford, 19 November 2018
5. T Ridge, *Living with Poverty: a review of the literature on children's and families' experiences of poverty*, Research Report No.594, Department for Work and Pensions, 2009, p49
6. E Tanner and others, *The Costs of Education: a local study*, Child Poverty Action Group, for CPAG Oxford and District Branch, 2003
7. Initially we aimed to examine primary schools as well, but as we did not get sufficient responses, we decided to focus only on secondary schools.
8. R Walker, *The Shame of Poverty*, Oxford University Press, 2014
9. Since education is a devolved policy area in the UK and we are interested in the local Oxford context, in this study we focus on England at the government level.

TWO

THE STUDY IN CONTEXT

CHILD POVERTY AND THE COSTS OF SCHOOL IN ENGLAND AND OXFORD

In the years before the financial crisis, under Labour governments, the UK saw significant falls in child poverty. In the 1994/95 financial year, a third of children lived in poverty, falling to 27 per cent in 2011/12.¹ However, this progress has been reversed recently and child poverty has been on the rise since 2011/12. In 2016/17, 4.1 million children lived in poverty in the UK, a rise of 500,000 in the last five years.² Certain types of families are hit particularly hard by these alarming trends. The poverty rate of children in lone-parent families has risen to 49 per cent compared with 25 per cent of those in couple families, and 38 per cent of children living in families with three or more children lived in poverty in 2016/17.³ The extent of the problem is exemplified by a high number of articles in the press in the past year about children going to school hungry and/or in poor clothing and many going hungry in the summer holidays.⁴

Oxford is in one of the better-off areas of England. However, according to the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation, 10 of Oxford's 83 neighbourhood areas ('super output areas') are among the 20 per cent most deprived areas in England. One is among the 8 per cent most deprived. These areas display multiple forms of deprivation, such as low skills and low incomes. In relation to children and young people, three of the neighbourhoods are among the 1 per cent most deprived in England.⁵ Partly because of the particularly high costs of housing, overall 16.5 per cent of children lived in poverty in Oxfordshire in 2015.⁶ After adjusting for housing costs, 25 per cent of children in Oxford itself live below the poverty line, and three Oxford neighbourhoods have child poverty rates of over 40 per cent. Oxford is also a very unequal city, with far more of the children who are in poverty living in the southern and eastern parts of the city.

Poverty not only puts the overall health and wellbeing of children at risk, but also has potentially serious consequences for their educational attainment. Recent research by one of the main trade unions for teachers found that almost 71 per cent of teachers had experience of pupils coming to school hungry, and 78 per cent reported that they knew of pupils who were lacking in energy and concentration as a result of eating poorly.⁷ In England and Northern Ireland, at

age 16 young people from poorer backgrounds are a third less likely to achieve good qualifications than better-off students.⁸ Evidence shows that children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are twice as likely to fail to reach a basic minimum level of skills.⁹ There is also clear evidence of increased attendance and attainment of disadvantaged pupils when barriers to learning are removed.¹⁰

Of pupils eligible for free school meals in Oxford, fewer than four in 10 have a good level of development by age five. Only a quarter achieve five good GCSEs, including English and maths (the national average is just over half). More than one in five are not in education, employment or training a year after taking their GCSEs. In Oxford, only 4 per cent go to a selective university.¹¹

In addition to the impact of poverty on children's educational achievement, the effect of costs specifically related to schooling has attracted increasing attention in the past few years. 'All children in England between the ages of five and 16 are entitled to a free place at a state school' claims the government's website.¹² Nevertheless, charities and research institutions have demonstrated what families have long been experiencing in their daily lives: that 'free schooling' in reality entails a number of costs that parents have to cover from their own income.

The Children's Commission on Poverty found that school-related costs make up a significant proportion of family budgets: on average at that time, parents spent £800 per year on these costs.¹³ It also showed that some schools ignored government guidelines and legal requirements on costs. The same study found that families spent an average of £126 on school clothing for secondary school children, and Family Action showed that the average annual back-to-school cost (such as uniforms, coats, bags and stationery) was £285 for a child at secondary school at the time.¹⁴

These costs can have serious consequences, both for families' daily lives and for children's school performance and experiences. Another study by the Children's Commission on Poverty found that 30 per cent of children whose families were 'not well off at all' had fallen behind at school because they could not afford the necessary computer or internet facilities at home. Moreover, it identified that more than one million children in the UK lived in families that had cut back on their spending on such essentials as food so they could cover the cost of school uniforms.¹⁵ The inability to pay for items, or the hardship that paying for them causes, can lead to embarrassment for the child concerned, bullying by others,¹⁶ and potentially to truancy, as well as to conflict with teachers and disciplinary action.¹⁷ A survey by CPAG of the experiences of members of the National Education Union showed that 56 per cent of respondents thought that the reason why eligible children do not receive free school meals was because parents feel too embarrassed to claim them, further demonstrating the wide-reaching effect poverty stigma can have on families.¹⁸

Additional school costs can even have an effect on children's choice of study and their professional ambitions, as certain subjects such as art, design or technology require extra materials that they may not be able to afford. However, these are also subjects that may potentially pave the way to high-paying professional jobs.¹⁹ CPAG found that 27 per cent of students on free school meals, 14 per cent of low-income students and even 8 per cent of better-off students chose not to study arts or music because of the associated costs.²⁰

EDUCATION POLICY IN ENGLAND

Since all three schools included in our survey were academies, it is important to briefly discuss their introduction and the overall effects in England. The Labour government under Tony Blair had initially introduced academies, but only for schools deemed to be 'failing'. In 2010, however, parliament passed the Academies Act, making it possible for all state secondary schools to convert to become academies. Academies are publicly funded institutions with increased independence from the local education authority. They are not obliged to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term dates. Nevertheless, they still have to follow the same rules on special educational needs and exclusions as other state schools.²¹ They also follow the same rules on admissions, but they act as their own admissions authority. In 2017, 69 per cent of all secondary school pupils studied in academies.²²

While the financial oversight of maintained schools (non-academies) is the responsibility of local education authorities, this responsibility is delegated to the Education and Skills Funding Agency in the case of academies. In 2014, regional schools commissioners were established as an additional layer of oversight over academies. They are responsible for making decisions about academy applications, monitoring the performance of academies and taking action when an academy is underperforming. Their powers have recently been extended to effect intervention in maintained schools as well. Ofsted²³ is responsible for regular inspection of the performance of both academies and maintained schools, and the Department for Education is accountable for the overall performance of the school system in England.

Since 2010, schools have been strongly encouraged to become academies, while those deemed underperforming by Ofsted often have had no choice – their governance has been removed from the local education authority and handed to an academy trust. This also meant that these schools ceased to exist as individual legal entities, as being an academy means that the school transfers certain responsibilities to an academy trust. An academy trust is the charitable company that runs an academy or a group of academies (in the latter case, it is a 'multi-academy trust'). The board of trustees signs off the annual accounts of the trust and is responsible for adherence to the trust's funding agreement with the Secretary of State. It is the trustees who are therefore responsible for the

trust's accountability to parliament, and to the Secretary of State as the principal regulator of academies.²⁴

In England, state secondary schools receive the major part of their budget from central government, through the Department for Education. In 2014/15, 95.7 per cent of the income of maintained schools (£24.1 billion) came from the government, 3.6 per cent (£903.1 million) was raised by the schools themselves, and the remaining funding came from other non-government sources. In the case of academies, the picture was only slightly different. The Department for Education provided 94.1 per cent of their income (£15 billion) in the same year, with an additional 4.3 per cent (£680.3 million) raised by schools themselves, and the remaining funding coming from other non-government sources.²⁵

In the past few years, secondary schools have experienced a decline in their funding. In 2015, the government announced that it would increase the schools budget by 7.7 per cent, from £39.6 billion in 2015/16 to £42.6 billion in 2019/20.²⁶ However, the National Audit Office highlighted that the estimated 10.3 per cent (284,000) increase in the number of secondary-school pupils over this period, which the budget increase did not account for, meant a decrease in funding per pupil once inflation was taken into account.²⁷ At the same time, schools are facing external cost pressures resulting from policy reforms such as pay rises, the introduction of the national living wage, and higher employer contributions to the national insurance system and the teachers' pension scheme, which the Department for Education does not cover with additional funds.

The government, instead of providing funding that takes account of the increasing number of pupils and the monetary effects of policy reform, as well as inflation, urges schools to introduce 'economies and efficiency savings in workforce and procurement'. In our local study, the headteacher of one of the schools we studied said that the main barrier facing the school in relation to supporting a broad spectrum of educational and extracurricular activities was the lack of a predictable budget. According to their experience, changes in government policy part way through a financial year could leave the school with holes in its budget and less flexibility on support for pupils. This led in 2018 to the first protest march by England's headteachers, arguing that their school budgets were in crisis because of years of cuts.²⁸

The Department for Education estimated that to counteract the pressures described above schools would need to make savings of £3 billion by 2019/20. This is equivalent to an 8 per cent real-terms reduction in per pupil funding between 2014/15 and 2019/20.²⁹ The National Audit Office has also identified signs of financial challenges in secondary schools. Between 2010/11 and 2014/15, the proportion of maintained secondary schools spending more than their income rose from 33.7 per cent to 59.3 per cent. Between 2012/13 and 2014/15, the proportion of secondary academies spending more than their income rose from 38.8 per cent to 60.6 per cent.³⁰ It seems clear that secondary

schools – maintained schools, as well as academies – are being underfunded under the current education policies.

A 2018 study by the National Governance Association found that funding was the most pressing concern for school governing boards (those of maintained schools as well as academies). Seventy-four per cent of the 5,218 respondents to the annual survey (who were governors, trustees and academy committee members) reported that they found current funding insufficient, and secondary schools specifically reported being particularly badly hit. Only one in five respondents were confident that they could manage budget constraints without compromising the quality of education. Only half the respondents said that they were balancing income and expenditure, and almost a third reported drawing on reserves. Seventy-five per cent of the latter said that these would be exhausted within two years.³¹ And parents are also aware of the financial hardship schools are facing. ‘Schools are not well enough funded to reduce costs for parents,’ said one of the parents who completed the survey which is the subject of this study (School C).

Furthermore, shrinking funds and changing policies to establish a ‘self-improving school-led system’ affect schools differently. Greany and Higham also highlighted that while higher status schools are benefiting from policy changes in terms of new opportunities and resources, lower status schools are faced with a concentration of challenges such as under-subscription, increased movement of pupils throughout the school year, and disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged, migrant and ‘hard to place’ children.³²

THE PUPIL PREMIUM

The government introduced pupil premium funding in April 2011 (first, for the 2011/12 academic year), to help schools narrow the attainment gap that still exists between pupils from disadvantaged and more affluent backgrounds. This replaced alternative arrangements operated by local education authorities. Eligibility for the pupil premium for 2012/13 onwards was extended to pupils who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years, and schools also receive funding for children who have been ‘looked after’ continuously (what used to be known as ‘in care’) and some others. The pupil premium fund is not earmarked, so schools have some flexibility in spending their pupil premium, although they are accountable to Ofsted ‘for how they use the additional funding to support [eligible] pupils from low-income families and the other target groups’.³³ Nevertheless, the funding aims to improve the educational achievement of disadvantaged children and close the attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds, which may direct schools to focus on pupils’ test scores rather than their overall experience of school.

The National Audit Office has found that 75 per cent of secondary schools felt that the pupil premium had boosted pupil attainment³⁴ and research conducted by the National Governance Association found that there was a clear correlation between high progress for all and high progress for pupils eligible for the pupil premium.³⁵

However, the most recent annual survey by the National Governance Association found that the positive impact of the pupil premium was threatened by the current funding climate, described above.³⁶ Its findings revealed that, although very few respondents actually claimed that their school used the pupil premium to plug the funding gap, only 71.6 per cent of respondents ring-fenced their pupil premium funds. While there is no legal requirement on schools to ring-fence the pupil premium monies, this does suggest that many schools may be using the funding to subsidise other spending commitments.³⁷

Schools are accountable to Ofsted in relation to their success in narrowing the educational achievement gap by their spending of the pupil premium. In 2012, Ofsted inspectors visited primary and secondary schools to see how effectively they were spending their pupil premium funding to maximise achievement in this way. Based on its findings, Ofsted made recommendations for schools on how to use pupil premium funding successfully. One of these is to 'have a clear policy on spending the pupil premium, agreed by governors and publicised on the school website'. The survey conducted by the National Governance Association identified a disconnect between the pastoral barriers to educational achievement facing pupils eligible for the pupil premium and the teaching and learning initiatives that schools are funding through the pupil premium.³⁸

All three schools included in our research published information on the pupil premium on their websites. One provides detailed information about how the pupil premium funding was spent in the last school year (between September 2017 and August 2018) in an easy-to-understand format. It explains the main barriers to educational achievement faced by disadvantaged children in the school and how the use of the funding addresses these issues. In addition, it lists the ways in which the school measures the impact of the funding, namely students' progress and attendance and the engagement of their parents. In addition, it publishes its pupil premium strategy statement, and gives directions to parents who want to get further information about the funding.

Another provides a brief explanation on its website in accessible language of the overall aims and possible uses of the pupil premium, as well as the ways in which the school has made decisions about the use of the funding and what evidence informed these decisions. Other than this, the school only publishes its official pupil premium reports and refers parents to government information on the scheme that is not necessarily easy to understand for a lay audience.

The third also publishes its pupil premium report and impact statement on its website, parts of which are written in broadly accessible language, although a

significant part of the report and the entire statement consist of fairly complex and technical tables.

The schools' websites and the interviews we conducted with the three headteachers suggest that all three schools define 'achievement' in broad terms and spend at least some part of the pupil premium funding on facilitating an enriching and inclusive experience at school for disadvantaged children. Examples include:

We also recognise that eligibility for the pupil premium does not equate with low ability or achievement... We aim to narrow and ultimately close the gap in performance, breaking the link between deprivation and low attainment. We also aim to enrich the educational experience of all of our students.

As a result, this school spends the extra funding on items and activities including individual support for uniform, equipment, breakfast club, trip subsidies and extra-curricular activities, among other items:

Schools have the freedom to spend the pupil premium in any way they think will best support the raising of attainment, predominantly in English and maths, for the most disadvantaged pupils. Pupil premium and pupil premium plus funds are not ring-fenced. [They are] not distributed [on] a child by child basis and the school has full autonomy on how they [choose] to spend the money. Therefore, pupil premium funds can be used on a variety of interventions personalised to the needs of pupils and cohorts.

Another school reports that it spent 2 per cent of its pupil premium funding on 'educational trips (cultural capital)', such as trips to the Aim Higher, Step Up Conference and Blenheim Palace, and activities such as the Wilderness Challenge, German Exchange and Year 7 Camping. The headteacher of this school also made it clear in the interview that they did not consider that 'educational value' was the only criterion for deciding whether support should be offered to a pupil and quoted the fact that two pupils eligible for the pupil premium had been supported to go on a trip abroad, as this was felt to be of particular value to their progress. They also argued that academic results should not be the only criterion on which children (and the school) were judged. The other two headteachers also highlighted that school trips, uniforms, shoes and other items, such as tablets (computers), were also subsidised for disadvantaged children from pupil premium money.

These examples confirm that schools do have some choice in using pupil premium funds and it is a matter of school policy whether they spend these funds on children living in low-income households in general or only on children who qualify for the pupil premium. However, the headteachers we talked to highlighted that some extra-curricular activities, such as a rowing club, and other forms of support were only offered to children eligible for the pupil premium in each school.

Nevertheless, our study also shows that these policies may leave out certain children – who do not qualify for the pupil premium, but whose parents may still find it difficult to afford the costs of additional activities or materials – as the following comment by a parent demonstrates:

‘Generally, the costs of children’s education make the children lose out on some things – especially swimming class, because children of working-class families have to pay for swimming class as well as school meals.’
Parent, School C

This leads us to the broader topic of families’ access to support (or their lack of it).

ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Research from the past few years clearly shows that more and more families are facing difficulties in making ends meet in the UK. The continued rise in employment is no longer capable of reducing poverty. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that eight million people live in poverty in families in which at least one person is in work:³⁹

The rise in in-work poverty over the last five years has been driven almost entirely by the increase in the poverty rate of working parents. A working parent is over one-and-a-half times more likely to be in poverty than a working non-parent.

While children’s benefits are still very important in covering the additional costs of a child, benefits and tax credits for adults and children are falling in real terms (partly because many working-age benefits are being frozen for four years). Thus, these provisions are unable to meet needs effectively and, as a result, families can fall short of meeting their costs overall.⁴⁰

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and CPAG in Scotland both found that families are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their housing costs. Rising rents combined with cuts in support for low-income renters result in more people struggling financially.⁴¹ Besides, the importance of childcare costs in determining whether families can make ends meet is also increasing,⁴² but is not reflected in the official UK figures on low income.

In our survey, some of the parents resented the fact that their child had not qualified for certain forms of support and subsidies, even though they were on relatively low wages and sometimes found it difficult to meet school costs. The interviews with headteachers confirmed the fact that many forms of school-level support were only available for children eligible for the pupil premium and had to be claimed. Such school policies have a number of adverse consequences.

Firstly, our survey clearly showed that a number of parents just above the pupil premium threshold are still struggling to make ends meet, including having difficulty in meeting school costs. This was reinforced by the headteacher of one of the schools included in this research, who pointed out that there could be some families not on the pupil premium register who were in poverty, while others might qualify for support on the basis of having had a 'bad patch' (maybe six years ago) which the family had already left behind. However, government regulations allow for some flexibility in spending pupil premium funds, as noted above.

Secondly, the fact that parents have to apply for help can lead to low take-up if parents are not well informed about the available support. In our survey, the overwhelming majority of parents were not aware of the support available towards the costs of school (see details in Section 3).

Furthermore, the fact that a few parents were aware of help being available with school costs, or had received such help themselves, suggests that their school did better in terms of informing parents about available support. It also demonstrates that schools' freedom to define their own policies concerning requirements and informing parents about available support makes parents and children vulnerable and that those who attend schools with less well advertised and/or less sensitive policies may face hardship because of having to provide the required items without assistance. Nevertheless, it does indicate that well-designed and well-advertised school-level policies on financial or in-kind support can make a difference for families facing financial difficulties.

Lastly, research clearly shows that many low-income people feel ashamed to ask for support and would rather do without.⁴³ Such a finding argues for universal schemes and/or sensitive ways of providing targeted support. In Section 5 of this report, we list a number of ways in which schools can help parents in need to receive the support that enables their children to reach their full potential academically, socially and emotionally.

One school provides a good example by stating on its website:

The provision supported by pupil premium funds will be identified in our school budget and at times the provision will be accessed by students not eligible for [the] pupil premium, as in our community, deprivation may exist amongst those not eligible. We also assert that an inclusive approach means that support is fully integrated into the school's systems and may be accessed by those in greatest need.

Notes

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THREE ANALYSIS

Schools, including academies, are required by law to design and publish their charging and remissions policy.

All three of the schools publish policies that follow the wording of the law concerning charging and remissions, and two of them state:

In order to remove financial barriers from disadvantaged pupils, [the multi-academy trust] has agreed that some activities and visits where charges can legally be made will be offered at no charge or a reduced charge to parents in particular circumstances.

CLOTHING

All three schools surveyed require students to wear a uniform, though this has not always been the case in the past. Previous research has demonstrated that uniform is likely to be the cheapest option for parents when it comes to clothing their children and many children appreciate that uniform minimises (even if it does not necessarily eliminate) visible income differences.¹

'At the time I thought the school uniform was an enormous amount of money, but it has lasted all year, some of it will do for next year, and I think in the long run it has saved us money as she has needed very few other clothes.' Parent, School C

Nevertheless, the cost of uniform is an extra item in families' budgets and, if school policies are not sensitive enough, it can be a considerable burden for low-income parents. Our survey found significant differences in how much parents spend on school uniform, even within the same school. However, no one reported spending less than £25 over the year. Just over 30 per cent of respondents reported spending between £75 and £100 in the year, nearly 27 per cent spent between £50 and £75, and over 25 per cent spent more than £100 in that year.

There is clear (albeit non-statutory) government guidance from the Department for Education for all maintained schools and academies on how to develop school uniform policy:²

When considering how the school uniform should be sourced, governing bodies should give highest priority to the consideration of cost and value for money for parents. The school uniform should be easily available for parents to purchase and schools should seek to select items that can be purchased cheaply, for example in a supermarket or other good value shop. Schools should keep compulsory branded items to a minimum and avoid specifying expensive items of uniform – eg, expensive outdoor coats.

Furthermore, the legally binding School Admissions Code 2014 states:

Admission authorities must ensure that... policies around school uniform or school trips do not discourage parents from applying for a place for their child.

Our research found that all three schools made attempts to ease the burden on parents to provide uniform for their children. All of them accept a wide range of items to be worn by pupils, such as supermarket trousers, skirts and shirts. Nevertheless, all three required certain items such as blazers, jumpers and ties to be bought from a single provider:

'Branded school uniform is particularly expensive and should be minimised. [Our child's school] is better than many other schools we know of in keeping this to a minimum. We appreciate this.' Parent, School C

Following the report by the Children's Commission on Poverty (CCoP) in 2015, the government declared that it would:³

Ensure that effective competition is used to drive better value for money and will therefore put existing best practice guidance for school uniform supply in England on a statutory footing. This will ensure that schools deliver the best value for parents by avoiding exclusivity arrangements unless regular competitions for suppliers are run.

Nevertheless, the CCoP reported recently that this commitment had still not been acted on, and there were no signs of this happening in the near future.⁴ All that parents are left with is therefore the Department for Education's expectation for 'schools to take full account of [its] guidance'.⁵

This is clearly not enough to protect families from prohibitive expense; in fact, there are signs of families facing increasing hardship concerning the cost of school uniform. The CCoP found that a considerably greater proportion of families were adversely affected by the cost of school uniform in 2018 than in 2015.⁶ Despite

the statutory guidance cited above, 7 per cent of parents (around twice the proportion compared to 2015) stated that the costs of school uniform affected the school they chose for their children.

Furthermore, even if children wear uniform, there are other necessary items of clothing for school, from such necessities as shoes and coats to more specific items required by the school. Almost all parents who filled in our survey (over 95 per cent) estimated that they spent more than £25 on shoes in that year, more than half of them (59 per cent) spending between £25 and £50, and over a third (36 per cent) spending over £50 in year 7. Parents are also responsible for providing physical education (PE) kits for their children in all three schools. The majority of parents responding to our survey (nearly 72 per cent) spent between £25 and £75 on PE equipment in that year, only a few (nearly 5 per cent) spending less than £25, while almost a quarter of all respondents reported spending more than £75 in that year.

Some parents expressed their frustration about having to buy what they saw as unnecessary items of clothing (eg, football boots and shin pads worn only a few times) or ones that children grow out of quickly. Some also described how their family feels pressurised to provide these items, as the following comment from one parent shows:

'Football boots and pointless sports items should not be mandatory and children should not be bullied into getting them by PE teachers.' Parent, School C

The majority (80 per cent) of parents said that they were not aware of financial help being available towards items of school clothing and only two parents stated that such help was available in their child's school, in spite of the fact that some form of support was in fact available in each school.

'Don't know how school helps with costs. You would need to ask about this? If you look at the uniform section on the school website, there is nothing about help, though it does say if you have no computer you can get an order form to order uniform.' Parent, School C

The consequences are alarming: even though only one parent reported in our survey that their child had missed school because of not having adequate clothing, the potential is clearly there for this to apply to more children if parents are not aware of support available. In addition, 20 per cent of respondents said that their child had gone without an item of school clothing or shoes because it had cost too much at the time. Some parents highlighted that keeping the uniform requirements simple so that more affordable items can be purchased, and being able to buy secondhand items, were particularly helpful ways to help with these costs.

SCHOOL MEALS

The results of our survey show that many parents are facing difficulties in providing school meals for their children. Children in England are entitled to free school meals in the first three years of primary school, regardless of income, but in later years pupils are only eligible if their parent receives any of the following: income support, income-related employment and support allowance, income-based jobseeker's allowance, support under the Immigration and Asylum Act, child tax credit (provided they do not get working tax credit and their annual income for tax credit purposes is within the guidelines set for the financial year), or the 'guarantee credit' of pension credit. Universal credit was added to this list in 2013, but from 1 April 2018 an earnings threshold was introduced (at £7,400), with eligibility determined by first looking at earnings received in the last complete universal credit assessment period immediately before the application for free school meals.⁷

However, 10 of the 62 respondents whose child did not qualify for free school meals indicated that it is difficult for them to meet the costs of school meals and another 18 said that it is sometimes difficult for them. This means that almost half (45 per cent) of the respondents had some level of difficulty in providing school meals for their child. These numbers clearly indicate that there are many families in Oxford for whom the cost of school meals is an issue. One reason for this is the pricing of school meals, as shown by the following comment from one parent (who, it seems, does not have worries about affording school costs):

'We are fortunate – this [costs connected to education] is not a problem for us. I would say school meals are a little expensive.' Parent, School C

Another reason why the cost of school meals may be problematic for some families is that parents who may need more support with school meals do not qualify for help under the current regulations, or are not aware of the help for which they are eligible. Research by the Fair Education Alliance demonstrated that due to the current opt-in policy for free school meals in the UK, approximately 200,000 eligible children do not claim this support.⁸ This may result in these pupils going hungry and not being able to reach their potential, as well as schools missing out on much needed pupil premium funding. Many respondents of CPAG's survey of National Education Union members thought that free school meals should be provided to all pupils in order to remove the stigma and bureaucratic hurdles associated with claiming them.

In our survey, only a few parents indicated that their child qualified for free school meals – in stark contrast to the much larger number of parents who said they were facing difficulties in meeting the costs of school meals:

'Free meals are only given to children whose parents are on benefit. Children whose parents are working are not allowed free meals, even if they struggle at some points.' Parent, School C

These findings suggest that the threshold of eligibility (at least as it applied before the new universal credit rules) is currently set too low and applied in too rigid a manner, which does not take into consideration the individual (if sometimes only temporary) vulnerabilities of families. One parent, for example, explained that she had three children and that paying for school meals (among other costs) for all three of them at the same time caused her some difficulty.

Some parents also raised concerns about the quality and quantity of school meals, which meant they paid for alternatives, even if their children were eligible for free meals. One parent pointed out that their child did not like the food on offer, and therefore did not eat it (taking packed lunches instead). Another parent commented on the inadequate quantity of these meals that prompted her to give extra money to her children so that they did not go hungry during the day:

'They receive free meals but amount of money they get doesn't get them much to eat.' Parent, School A

These concerns suggest the need for better quality and portion control at the school level, of school meals in general and free school meals in particular.

A new set of standards for food served in schools came into force in January 2015. They are mandatory in all local education authority-maintained schools, but only in certain academies: those that opened prior to 2010, or entered into a funding agreement from June 2014. The previous government said that the academies not bound by these standards are encouraged to commit voluntarily to them and an overwhelming majority said they would do so.⁹ This leaves pupils studying in these schools vulnerable to individual institutional arrangements and hence their access to healthy food in school is at risk. This has been confirmed by the Local Government Association, which stated in March 2016 that nearly 2,500 academies and free schools had not signed up to the standards – that is almost two-thirds of the academies not required by law to follow the standards.¹⁰ This leads to more than one million children attending schools that have not signed up to following the current school food standards.¹¹ The Local Government Association recommended to the government to effect legislative change to ensure that all academies and free schools have to formally commit to the standards.

Breakfast clubs are an initiative that has proved to be successful in the two schools in the study that run them. Such schemes, especially when open to all pupils as in the case of these two schools, can ensure that children obtain the food necessary for their concentration, energy and general health and wellbeing, while avoiding the potentially shaming effects of targeting (such as in the case of free school meals). As one parent put it:

'The free breakfast scheme [for all students] is excellent. I hope it avoids stigmatising 'free school meal' kids and is so important for their education.' Parent, School A

In 2016, the government announced that £10 million per year of revenue from the soft drinks levy (also known as the 'sugar tax') would be invested in healthy school breakfast clubs. These funds can help this successful model spread across England. It is important that this is sustained in the long run, no matter how much funding the soft drinks levy generates.

Nevertheless, the fact that the parent of a child who attended a school that did run a breakfast club suggested '... support that the school could offer, which some other local schools do, is possibly to provide a free breakfast service' not only underlines the significance of such provision, but also highlights the importance of providing adequate information about it to all parents and children.

The stigma attached to free school meals highlights that when it comes to social provisions and their take-up, it is not only eligibility that matters but also the way in which the provision is administered. From this point of view, it is promising that our research found that all three schools we studied operated cashless services in their cafeteria, which should in principle make free school meal receipt anonymous.

TRANSPORT

In the three schools included in our research, the most common way for students to travel to school was walking (some 41 per cent), but taking the bus (about 30 per cent), cycling (nearly a quarter) and being taken to school by car (about one in five) were also prevalent forms of transport. For the majority of parents who responded to the survey (nearly 60 per cent), it costs up to £5 to get their child to school each week, while just over a fifth spend between £5 and £10 per week on this and the same proportion spends more than £10 weekly. This could add up to as much as £65 per term for those with costs at the top end of the lowest band, and to a minimum of £130 per term in the most expensive one.

The law concerning the cost of travelling to school states:¹²

... for those categories of children of compulsory school age (5–16) in an authority's area for whom free travel arrangements will be required, local authorities are required to: provide free transport for all pupils of compulsory school age (5–16) if their nearest suitable school [including academies] is [in the case of] statutory walking distances eligibility: beyond two miles (if below the age of eight); or beyond three miles (if aged between eight and 16).

In other words, statutory support considers only the distance that the pupil has to travel, and not the income of her/his family. (The situation is different for those children with special educational needs or a disability.) Our study suggests that this support might be insufficient. One parent pointed out that 'we need support

with bus fares, cooking ingredients and school meals' (School A). Another highlighted that 'the children come late to school as they have to walk to school' (School C); and three respondents indicated that their child had missed school on occasion because they had not had the money for the costs of transport.

SCHOOL TRIPS

Trips are a regular form of activity in schools across the UK, ranging from shorter outings (eg, to the theatre) to longer, residential trips abroad – eg, to Paris, or skiing.¹³ Research published by CPAG has demonstrated that these trips are causing considerable difficulties for parents on low incomes and their children.¹⁴ Based on these findings, it is no surprise that it was the topic that parents brought up most often in their additional comments on the survey questionnaire. (This is particularly significant considering that the survey was conducted at the beginning of the school year.) This indicates both the importance of these trips in the lives of children and the difficulties that parents often face in trying to cover the costs.

Sections 449–462 of the Education Act 1996 set out the law on charging for school activities in schools maintained by local education authorities in England. Academies' funding agreements require them to follow the same rules for charging as maintained schools. The law is very clear that schools cannot charge for educational activities taking place during school hours – ie, if 50 per cent or more of the time is spent in school hours. For activities taking place outside school hours, schools cannot charge if the activity provides education that is part of the national curriculum, or part of a syllabus for a prescribed public examination that the pupil is being prepared for at the school, or part of religious education.¹⁵ Where a visit takes place in school hours, or is classed as part of the national curriculum, transport must also be free.¹⁶

Advice published by the Department for Education for schools, including academies, that is based on the terms of the Education Act 1996 explains:¹⁷

Where a school activity requires pupils to spend nights away from home, the school is allowed to make a charge for board and lodging. This is with the exception of pupils whose parents are in receipt of certain benefits... Since April 2003 the eligibility criteria that entitle families to an exemption from paying for the cost of board and lodging on residential visits have been aligned with free school meals eligibility criteria. The head teacher must inform all parents of the right to claim free board and lodging if they are receiving these benefits.

Furthermore, the governance handbook for academies, multi-academy trusts and maintained schools, published in January 2017, explains:¹⁸

It is a legal requirement for all schools to promote the cultural development of their pupils through the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development education requirements. Cultural education forms an important part of a broad and balanced curriculum, and children and young people should be provided with an engaging variety of cultural experiences throughout their time at school.

The law calls 'optional extras' the activities which take place out of school hours and are not part of the curriculum, and schools (maintained as well as academies) are free to charge for these. As noted above, schools can also charge for board and lodging on residential visits, even if the activity is part of the national curriculum. However, pupils whose parents are receiving income support and other similar benefits are exempt from these charges.

In the three schools included in our study, according to our survey, the majority of children in their first year at secondary school go on school trips always or sometimes: 50 per cent of respondents said their child would always go, and some 42 per cent said that they would go sometimes. One parent said that their child can never go on such trips and about 6 per cent indicated that their child can rarely go. (Unless they have older children, these parents may not yet have much experience of secondary school trips, so they may be basing their responses, in part, on their experience of primary schools, which probably tend to have fewer and less expensive trips.)

However, research shows that when children miss trips deemed not educational (ie, neither part of the national curriculum, nor aimed at promoting pupils' cultural development), they 'miss fun, new experiences and personal development and feel left out'.¹⁹ That is, even if trips are not explicitly educational, they can provide access to enriching new experiences and opportunities for children to succeed. They foster self-esteem and confidence, support the academic curriculum, improve fitness, and give opportunities for relaxation and enjoyment as well as socialising.²⁰

Besides, trips are also a chance to enhance class cohesion and deepen student-student and student-teacher/staff relationships. In this way, they can increase students' feeling of belonging. This is particularly important in the case of children from low-income families who are prone to view themselves as not 'fitting in', and who want to 'join in', having the same social and cultural expectations, and being driven by the same social imperatives, as others.²¹ Research conducted by CPAG found that it was the social and relationship-building aspect of trips that young people from low-income families missed most when they could not go along.²² It is no surprise therefore that it is of crucial importance for parents that their children do not miss out on these opportunities:

'My daughter went on a school trip to Paris recently which cost around £450. This was a huge amount of money for us to find, luckily we could spread the cost over six months. This was something she opted into, but

I thought it was such a valuable opportunity it was worth some sacrifices in other areas – eg, family trips out.’ Parent, School C

However, this comment also points to another important finding of our research, namely that many parents face difficulties and make sacrifices for their children to be able to participate in school activities and especially trips. A considerable number of respondents (39 per cent) indicated in our survey that paying for these trips caused some level of difficulty for them financially. Some 19 per cent said that it was difficult for them to afford school trips, while over 28 per cent said it was fairly difficult:

‘It’s always a worry that a big school trip will come up as it’s an extra expense that we can’t really afford, but would hate for our children to miss out.’ Parent, School A

Several respondents pointed out that even some UK-based trips were too costly, but trips abroad were particularly expensive, while not necessarily educational. In some cases, even parents who otherwise are not facing difficulty covering school costs expressed their concerns about the expenses related to trips:

‘No, not difficult, but trips like skiing at about £1,000 per child are really not helpful. We said no to this one, and she [her daughter] was fine about it but is it either affordable for most families, or educational? Other trips are fine.’ Parent, School A

The law also allows schools to ask parents for voluntary contributions towards the costs of school trips or any school activities – both educational activities taking place during school hours and optional extras. However, there is a statutory requirement that schools make it clear that such contributions are voluntary, and that parents are under no obligation to pay. Guidance from the National Governance Association highlights that ‘under no circumstances should this be an expectation, and parents who choose not to contribute should not be sent reminder letters’, let alone colour-coded ones.²³ And most importantly:

Children should never be singled out because of their parents’ lack of payment, and any requests for contributions must make clear that children will not be treated differently according to whether or not their parents make such a contribution.

When we asked parents how they felt about being asked to contribute voluntarily towards school trips, only one respondent answered that they knew they were not expected to pay, while about half the respondents (over 51 per cent) said they felt pressurised, either sometimes (more than a third) or always (over 12 per cent). The following quote shows how some parents may be inadequately informed or misled by the school’s communication about the costs of these trips:

'Only get fed up when a trip or event is compulsory, and money is requested, no option to opt out!' Parent, School C

Our findings also show that feeling pressurised to pay for school trips was more of an issue in one of the schools than in the two others, which suggests that school policies on the costs of trips can make a real difference.

Subsidies for some trips were available in all three schools included in our research for certain pupils (those eligible for the pupil premium, or considered disadvantaged by other standards). Two of our headteachers pointed to the 'educational relevance' of trips as the basis of their decision about whether the outings will be subsidised for eligible children or not – whereas the headteacher of the third school emphasised that 'educational value' should not be the only criterion for deciding about supporting participation in school trips. Instead, they considered whether the trip was felt to be of particular value to pupils' development and progress.

The majority of parents reported that, when they did have to pay, they were given the opportunity to spread the costs over a reasonable time period in each school. Some highlighted that it was in fact very helpful for them:

'This was a huge amount of money for us to find. Luckily, we could spread the cost over six months.' Parent, School C

'Being aware of trips in good time and being able to pay in instalments [was very helpful].' Parent, School B

'I haven't got much experience of trips therefore, but they do give you time and the instalments for paying are good.' Parent, School C

Based on these findings, we also consider it good practice that one school published the list of all school trips for the year (for each class) in advance on its website, including the cost of each trip. However, how parents can get support with these costs was not mentioned.

Nevertheless, there was a considerable number of respondents (over 28 per cent) who were not given the opportunity to spread the costs (or who perhaps did not know that this opportunity existed). Furthermore, the majority of respondents (over two-thirds) were not aware of help being available with the costs of school trips in their school: less than one-fifth said that their child's school does offer help with these costs, while 14 per cent explicitly said that no such help was available. And even though many parents reported facing difficulties in paying for these trips, only one of the 53 parents who responded to this question indicated that they had ever received help from the school with the costs of school trips, while 14 per cent said that their children had missed out on school trips previously. These responses indicate that many parents are unable to pay for these trips, or would need at least some help, but that they do not know

about available opportunities, are not eligible for them and/or do not want to ask for help:

'I didn't see anything about help with costs and I wouldn't know who to approach in the school to ask.' Parent, School C

'I don't know if I just haven't seen it, but I don't recall anything about "if you have difficulty paying something get in touch". Maybe because I'm not looking. But it's not very prominently advertised.' Parent, School C

Lastly, concerning school trips, our research also demonstrated that certain types of families face particular problems when it comes to paying for trips, such as single mothers, parents with reduced work capacity, and also large families – or those with twins, which can mean that costs arise at the same time:

'We can usually manage normal school costs, but it will be hard to manage longer trips (ie, French trip) for all three children.' Parent, School C

'Sometimes it is hard to meet the costs. Being a single mum with only a part-time job and because of this... miss out on free meals and money for trips.' Parent, School C

OTHER ITEMS

Lastly, we asked parents whether there were any other items that their child had to have for school which they needed to pay for, other than clothing, meals, transport and school trips. CPAG's research shows that in secondary schools teachers were commonly aware of students missing out on preferred subject or course options because their families could not afford the costs of specialist equipment, such as materials, musical instruments, sports gear, computers or cameras.

Almost all respondents to our survey (nearly 94 per cent) said that this was the case. The most common additional items were: cooking ingredients, stationery, maths equipment, bags, art materials, project materials, books, revision books and computers (tablets). The cost of these items varied widely among parents, from £2 up to £90 per term, with an average cost of £23 per term. The three schools included in our research did show some differences concerning these items and costs. The median (ie, typical) amounts that parents spent on these additional school items were £10, £20 and £30 per term in the three schools. The difference between these sums could be significant for many parents.

All three schools issued a list of items of equipment that their pupils were required to have in school. These lists included black and coloured pens and pencils, pencil sharpener, eraser, highlighters, ruler, whiteboard pen, scientific

calculator, protractor, and compass, among other items. None of them listed, however, who could receive support towards the cost of acquiring these necessary items, and how they might do so. It is to be assumed that there is no such help available, and no parent mentioned that there was.

Cooking ingredients were especially frequently mentioned in the survey and the interviews as items on which parents had to spend considerable amounts of money, often without due notice. Besides, some parents pointed to the often irrational way in which these ingredients had to be provided (eg, each pupil was required to bring one teaspoonful of mustard or a few drops of vanilla), while others complained about buying the ingredients only to have them thrown out due to the class having been cancelled:

'I spent over £10 in ingredients last week only for the cooking to be cancelled and the fresh food went off! If my child did not take the ingredients in, they would be punished. What a waste of money and good food.' Parent, School C

Advice issued by the Department for Education in 2018 states:²⁴

School governing bodies and local authorities, subject to the limited exceptions referred to in this advice, cannot charge for education provided during school hours (including the supply of any materials, books, instruments or other equipment).

Some of these exceptions are when parents have indicated in advance that they would like their child to own or take the finished product home. In these cases, schools can make a charge to cover the costs of materials and ingredients. Nevertheless, some parents in our study expressed their frustration about the blurring of boundaries between what was a donation from an individual and what was provided by the state. One parent we interviewed said that while the school had always asked for contributions to specific project materials, now it seemed to be asking for everyday resources for the classroom, such as textbooks. Also, in our study parents did not seem to be informed about the option of not wanting their child to own or take the finished product home (eg, of cooking class) and thus not having to pay for the ingredients.

Computers and tablets can be particularly challenging for parents to provide, due to their high cost. One solution our research found schools to be offering was not requiring pupils to use their personal computer/tablet and making sure that this kind of equipment is instead available on the school site (eg, in the library or separate computer labs) in sufficient quantity. Another solution, offered by one of the schools, was to make it mandatory for pupils to use a personal computer/tablet, but to offer a variety of ways in which parents can provide the device – eg, paying in instalments, full-time or daytime loan of the equipment. This school proved to be fairly sensitive to the inequalities between parents' financial circumstances, and hence made sure that they were well informed

about the tablet scheme – eg, it issued a booklet and organised a specific information session for parents. It also made it clear that parents should not feel pressurised about this requirement and encouraged parents to ask questions about the scheme and seek help with acquiring the device.

In an age when pupils are increasingly required to use a computer in class, as well as do their homework on a computer, and access the internet in relation to their studies, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that pupils should have access to a personal device. Considering that all three schools in our research proved to be highly ‘online’ (eg, pupils submit their homework online, school meals are paid online, parents communicate with the school online), it seems beneficial – and perhaps inevitable – that pupils and their families have access to a computer. According to the former headteacher of this school, one of the advantages of this scheme is precisely the fact that parents would probably gain access to a computer at home too, which could prove to be beneficial in other areas of their lives as well, not only concerning their children’s education – eg, searching for jobs, or being better informed. Nevertheless, it is crucial that any school be sensitive to the financial constraints of families and provide adequate information and support to everyone if this is to be the assumption.

These equipment-related costs can ultimately result in children living in low-income households falling behind in class because they do not have the necessary equipment. Some parents highlighted access to books and revision materials as particularly important because these are essential to complete the curriculum:

‘Provide each child with their own text book for each lesson!!! It’s really difficult for children to revise and do homework to a good standard without these essential books!’ Parent, School C

Some parents highlighted music lessons as something which they had to pay for, but which they believed should be free:

‘In general we are able to meet the costs of our child’s education as we are a working couple. However, we would like our child to have piano lessons at school, but are unable to afford it as we are already paying approximately £110 a term for violin lessons. Our child is passionate about music and schools do not currently have the budget for music tuition, so the cost ultimately falls to the parents. I do know other children at the school are receiving free music tuition as their parents are in receipt of free school meals, but I feel that some children of working families may suffer if they do not have available funds.’ Parent, School C

Instrumental and vocal music tuition is an exception to the rule that education provided during school hours must be free. The law allows schools to charge for musical instrument tuition, provided it is not required by the national curriculum tuition at key stage 2 Instrumental and Vocal Tuition Programme or does not form part of the syllabus for a prescribed public examination.²⁵ Since 2007, the law

also allows charging for tuition in larger groups than was previously the case. Charges may now be made for groups of any size if the tuition is provided at the request of the pupil's parent. Charges, however, may not exceed the cost of the provision, including the cost of the staff who provide the tuition, and no charge may be made in respect of a pupil who is looked after by a local authority.

These statutory regulations, and what research shows about schools' financial circumstances, indicate that parents' difficulties with meeting these costs cannot be solved merely by school-level support for particular children. If these items and activities are necessary to ensure a high-quality education in the twenty-first century – and we would argue that they are – children should be provided with them at no extra cost in a free education system, as the law already requires. However, schools have to be granted sufficient funds to be able to do this.

Notes

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FOUR CONCLUSIONS

This report presents the findings of a small-scale, local study of the costs of education in secondary schools in Oxford, in year 7 in particular, from the viewpoint of parents.

Our findings suggest that the idea of a free education in Oxford, and in England in general, is far from the reality. Low-income families are likely to be under-represented in our study, but nonetheless many respondents reported having difficulty in meeting school costs.

Parents want the best for their children and our research shows that many make sacrifices to ensure that they do not miss out on opportunities or feel excluded. At the same time, many parents feel pressured to make 'voluntary' contributions (monetary or in kind) towards school costs.

Eligibility for support, or the lack thereof, was another overarching theme identified by our research. Many parents indicated that even though they were struggling to pay for their children's school clothes, trips, music lessons and other required items, they were not eligible for statutory support, because they were in work and their income exceeded the threshold of eligibility. As a result, some felt resentment at the fact that others received support while they were also struggling to make ends meet and made sacrifices. These findings suggest that eligibility criteria are inadequate and lack the universality or flexibility and gradation that would allow families who are 'just about managing' to be helped. Consequently, the current system of support fails to ease the burden on many families just above the threshold for help and thus creates social divisions.

Another theme that emerged from our study was parents' lack of information about available support. Many indicated that they were not aware of existing help, and there is little or no information on the schools' websites about what support they offer towards school costs and how parents can access this support. Nevertheless, as asking for support itself can be a humiliating experience for both pupils and their parents, it would be more desirable if these costs were not borne unduly by the current generation of parents, but instead were part of collective provision by all taxpayers.

Our study suggests that an underlying reason for these costs is that schools are seriously underfunded. We are concerned that the insufficient and unpredictable funding schools receive from the government (be they academies or schools maintained by local education authorities) puts pressure on the schools to fill the gaps in their budgets in any way they can. And parents are faced with having to meet these costs at a time when their resources are severely curtailed by increasing rents and government support for low-income families being cut significantly and/or frozen.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

- Increase school funding in real terms on a per pupil basis.¹
- Ensure that pupil premium funding is protected in real terms.²
- Introduce measures that tackle parents' unemployment, low pay and increasing housing costs. End the freeze on working-age benefits, including child benefit, restore their real value and increase them in line with inflation.
- Introduce automatic registration of eligible pupils for free school meals, and therefore also the pupil premium.³
- Issue and widely publicise clear guidelines about how schools can ask for voluntary contributions.⁴
- Issue clear government guidelines/statutory requirements on spending the pupil premium, including information provided by schools for parents about it, and ensure effective monitoring of how individual schools conform to these guidelines and requirements.
- Reissue the government guidance on school uniform to ensure that all schools are aware of it and remind them of their responsibilities in relation to the affordability and availability of school uniform.⁵
- Make the guidance on school uniform statutory, and thus legally binding, and make cost the top priority.⁶
- Explore the possibility of capping the cost of school uniforms.⁷
- Reissue the 2015 school food standards, and ensure that all schools are aware of these standards and enforce them in practice.
- Promote poverty awareness training for teaching, administrative and pastoral staff in schools. Possible models include: CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day training; Oxfam's training for job centre staff based on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach;⁸ ATD

Fourth World's Social Worker Training Programme;⁹ and a training package currently being developed by the Educational Institute of Scotland.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES AND ACADEMY TRUSTS

- Encourage schools to have a clear, written, accessible policy outlining inclusive approaches to school trips, school meals, uniform and school activities, and potentially draft these policies for schools.
- Encourage schools to have a clear, written, well-publicised policy on using pupil premium funding. Make this policy an integral part of the wider school development plan, not a stand-alone item.
- Promote anti-bullying policies that are alert to poverty-based bullying and stigma.
- Promote and support projects that identify and address unnecessary school day costs that create a barrier to education for many children. Both Children North East and CPAG have developed approaches that reduce stigma in schools and remove barriers to learning through a school auditing process that results in a tailored action plan for schools.¹¹
- Promote poverty awareness training for teaching, administrative and pastoral staff in schools (see examples above).
- Consult CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day Toolkit and Dundee report¹² to further understand the impact school day costs have on children from low-income families and how these can be addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- Have a clear, written and well-publicised policy on available help with school costs in both online and off-line formats.
- Involve pupils and parents in the development of school-level policies – eg, on charging, using pupil premium funding and available support.
- Set eligibility criteria for school-level support in a flexible way, based on families' actual circumstances. Introduce gradation of support and ensure that parents are aware of the help available and the eligibility criteria.
- If the school has a uniform, keep uniform requirements simple and easy to access.

- Ensure pupils are not punished for not wearing uniform or not bringing any additionally required equipment to school. Seek and offer real solutions instead, such as support towards costs.
- Administer subsidies and second-hand support (eg, for uniform, clothes and arts equipment) in a way that avoids stigma.
- Plan the school year with affordability in mind, spacing events and activities so that larger costs do not coincide.¹³ Publicise all larger costs that parents will be expected to meet (especially school trips) at the beginning of the year/term (or even before that for year 7 pupils).
- Provide and publicise opportunities for paying in instalments with due notice.
- Keep the costs of school trips and other extracurricular activities reasonable, so that pupils from low-income families are not excluded. For example, consider activities led by school staff or volunteers, consider camping as an inexpensive residential opportunity, visit sites locally, reach out to local voluntary organisations that can offer to lead some activities, search for the cheapest provider and do not involve a commercial intermediary agent.¹⁴
- Provide the staple ingredients for cookery classes, especially where only a small quantity is needed.
- Publicise help available from local and national charities, where applicable.
- Consult CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day Toolkit for information and resources on how to facilitate conversations about school day costs with pupils, school staff and parents.
- Engage with projects that identify and address unnecessary school day costs that create a barrier to education for many children (see examples above).

Notes

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