



# THE COST OF THE SCHOOL DAY

## THE COST OF LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN FAMILY EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL CLOSURES IN SCOTLAND

June 2020

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### Executive summary

On 20 March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic forced schools across Scotland and the rest of the UK to close their doors to the majority of pupils. Faced with a previously unimaginable crisis, schools have been going to extraordinary lengths to ensure children don't miss out during this period. At the same time, parents and carers have been suddenly faced with the new challenge of helping to continue their children's learning at home. The Cost of the School Day programme helps schools identify and remove the financial barriers that prevent children in poverty from fully participating in school life. We know that, while school should be free, children's education comes with many hidden costs. Even prior to the pandemic, many children lacked the resources they needed to participate in all the opportunities education can offer.

Schools help reduce cost pressures on families in many ways. They enable digitally excluded pupils to get online and provide access to ICT and software. They provide free breakfasts and school dinners. They print off worksheets and they lend out books. Schools also provide pastoral care, ensuring that pupils are safe, happy and able to thrive. For many children, school is the only place they get to see friends, play outside, and participate in sports and the arts. Many families simply do not have sufficient incomes to provide access to these things at home.

Prior to the current pandemic, children growing up in homes below the poverty line were already at a greater risk of poorer educational outcomes and wellbeing, as well as having increased barriers to engagement and participation in school life. We know that certain groups of children face a much higher possibility of living in poverty than others, this includes children from black and minority ethnic communities, those in larger or lone parent families and children in families where someone is disabled. Our research shows that Covid-19 has served to magnify some of the factors that contribute to the negative outcomes associated with growing up in poverty.

We conducted surveys to understand more about family experiences of learning during lockdown. In Scotland, 3,218 parents and carers and 1,074 children and young people took part, enabling us to understand more about the support offered to families during the initial period of school closures, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of households living on a low income. We asked people what was going well, and what support they had needed but did not receive. Our surveys looked at support with learning materials and resources, the provision of replacement free school meals, plus pastoral support for family wellbeing, including advice and signposting for financial support. We also asked people what they felt schools need to do to support

children when they reopen.

The parents and carers on low incomes that we heard from were just as likely as their better off peers to be concerned with helping their children to continue learning through lockdown. Nonetheless, they reported facing significantly more stress and worry around home learning and household finances than parents and carers in better off homes. We found that the cost burdens of school closures have fallen most heavily on families already living on a low income.

In particular, we found that:

- Low-income families who responded were twice as likely to say that they lacked all the resources they needed to support learning at home, with 40 per cent saying they were missing at least one essential resource.
- Low-income families were more likely to tell us they have had to buy educational resources compared to those in better off homes. People who told us they were worried about their financial circumstances were also more likely to have bought educational resources for their children. A third of people most worried about money have had to purchase a laptop, tablet or other device during lockdown.
- Around a third of all families who responded said that they were enjoying learning at home, and these families were much less likely to report having money worries or lacking the resources they needed. Families who were worried about money were more likely to say they found it difficult to continue their children's education at home.
- Eligible parents valued receiving support towards the cost of replacing free school meals. Most families told us they preferred to receive support through direct payments to their bank accounts, as this method allowed flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience.
- Children and young people valued being able to communicate with their teachers online, but phone calls were also highly appreciated by those that had received them. Parents and carers valued schools that took the time to understand their particular circumstances and offer personalised support.
- Secondary school pupils were more likely to report that they had done a lot of schoolwork at home if they were regularly keeping in touch with their teachers. Pupils who said that they were having infrequent or no contact with their schools reported doing much less work. Pupils who reported doing a lot of work at home were also more likely to report that their schools had provided them with the resources to help them work at home
- Socioeconomic status did not hugely influence parental views about returning to school amongst those responding to our survey. Regardless of income, the most important factor for many parents and carers was their schools providing emotional support to help pupils settle back in and come to terms with the events of 2020. Many were supportive of a gradual, phased approach with an emphasis on social and emotional support.

Our surveys found that the Covid-19 pandemic has been a hugely varied experience for families. Schools are likely to find that pupils are coming back to class having lived through very different lockdown experiences over the last few months. While learning loss and inequitable academic progress rightly concern educators and policymakers, parents and young people have told us they are equally concerned with the longer-term

effects of increased social isolation and household stress.

Families believe that schools have a vital role to play in helping children come to terms with the pandemic and the disruption it has caused to their childhoods. More than anything, children and young people told us they are desperate to reconnect with their friends. They view returning to school as their main opportunity to do this, and educators are now faced with the challenge of managing these expectations, while ensuring safety in their schools.

Public health experts suggest that there may be recurrent peaks of Covid-19, which may require further lockdowns.<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, essential that government, local authorities and schools review how well support has worked for families. This can help to inform the delivery of equitable blended learning and action in the event of any future lockdown.

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## Key recommendations

### Support with costs and resources

- **The UK government should increase child benefit by £10 per child per week.** Many families have experienced and will continue to experience increased costs as a result of the pandemic, including costs related to home learning. A £10 uplift in child benefit is the most efficient and effective\* way of getting money to families to reduce these cost burdens and tackle child poverty. In addition, **the Scottish government** should, in advance of the roll out of the Scottish child payment, **use its powers and existing delivery mechanisms at local and national level to provide emergency financial payments to low-income families.** Delivery options include increasing school clothing grants and Best Start payments.

\* Research<sup>2</sup> carried out by Professor Jonathan Bradshaw and Dr Antonia Keung found that an increase in child benefit of £10 per child per week would reduce child poverty by five percentage points.

- **Provide all children with the learning tools they need for the curriculum, at home or at school.** National government, local government and schools must work together to ensure that every child has the equipment and resources they need to take part in the work set by their teachers. While pupils without resources have been acutely affected during the pandemic, we know that children struggle to complete their regular homework for the same reasons.
- **Schools should be properly funded to remove barriers to learning.** While local government and schools are best placed to assess resource needs and allocate what is needed to pupils, national government must ensure resources and plans are in place that leave no child without the tools to fully participate in school activities.

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<sup>1</sup> UK Government (2020) Government launches test and trace service

<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw J and Keung A (2020) Poor children need a coronavirus bonus, York: Social Policy Research Unit

## Alternatives to free school meals

- **Cash payments should replace the value of free school meals.** Free school meal entitlements have been a lifeline for many families already facing financial pressures that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Direct payments increase uptake and are preferred by families as they provide flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience, all of which are highly valued.
- **The earnings threshold for eligibility for free school meals should be urgently reviewed.** Many working families are living in poverty but are not eligible for free school meals. The eligibility threshold must be reviewed as a matter of priority to ensure all children in need of this vital support receive it. This would also increase funding for schools to support these pupils' needs.

## Supporting pupil wellbeing

- **Maintain regular contact with pupils and families to support learning and wellbeing.** Schools must prioritise keeping in touch with pupils during periods where they may be at home as children and families say that this helps them to engage in learning and feel supported.
- **Schools should implement poverty aware approaches to policies and practices as pupils return.** Given recent events and the time spent out of school, families may not be able to afford or may not have access to certain items such as school uniforms or learning materials when it's time to return to school. Schools should take an understanding approach and recognise the struggles families may have faced during school closures.

## Returning to school

- **Children and young people want to spend time with their friends and teachers and feel 'normal' again.** As they reopen, schools should prioritise safe opportunities for children to rebuild bonds with their classmates and teachers whom they have missed greatly during school closures.
- **Families must be involved in planning for the return to school.** Schools and local authorities should consult with parents so they feel prepared and are able to plan work and childcare arrangements. Pupils should also be included to help reduce some of the worries and uncertainties they are feeling about returning to school life in changed circumstances.