

# The cost of a free education (2006 update)



For the vast majority of children securing a decent education is a critical factor in determining success in adult life. Graduates can expect to earn significantly more over their lifetimes than non-graduates and, conversely, school leavers with poor educational attainment are more likely to face poverty in adulthood.

Yet for a host of reasons children from low income families are less likely to flourish at school. Research has found that for these children school can be divisive and contribute to exclusion and that two issues in particular create problems due to the costs.<sup>1</sup> The first is clothes, and the importance of wearing the right clothes, including what is perceived by children as the 'right' school uniform. The second is school trips, which provide important developmental opportunities as well as educational ones, and which are critical in helping children to develop and strengthen bonds with their peers.

This briefing follows the publication in 2005 of *The cost of a free education*<sup>2</sup>, which was published to launch a campaign to highlight the wide range of costs faced by parents when sending their children to school and the particular difficulties this can cause to low income families. This briefing will focus on the difficulties parents face in meeting school uniform costs, but makes a series of recommendations with regard to all school costs to ensure that poverty stops at the school gate. Over the coming academic year as part of an ongoing campaign, the coalition will follow a number of families to see exactly what costs they are asked to meet each term. We plan to report on these costs next year.

## The current situation

Despite the importance of school uniforms and school experiences in promoting inclusion, for the vast majority of families, even those on very low incomes, there is very little support available to help meet school costs – and the situation is becoming worse, not better.

In 2004 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published a study into the costs of schooling which revealed that parents of secondary school pupils spend, on average, £948.11 per year on school costs and the average cost associated with sending a child to a state primary school is £563.15.<sup>3</sup> The same study found that 55 per cent of families in the two lowest income groups struggle to meet the costs. For these families the problem is becoming more acute; an annual index reveals that the total average cost of sending a child to state school, from the age of 5 through to age 16, is now over £14,000 compared to £10,000 in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

Local authorities have discretionary powers to provide low income families with grants to help meet the costs of

school uniforms. Regrettably the number of authorities providing such assistance is in decline – research conducted by Citizens Advice in 2004 found that 42 per cent of local authorities offer no help at all to parents, compared with 30 per cent in 2001.<sup>5</sup> Among local authorities that continue to provide grants the research found the average grant per child to be just £51.27. The disparity between the average local authority award and the actual costs of school uniforms leaves families with a significant shortfall to meet and, for those families who are unable to meet the difference in cost, it is often left to charities to pick up what should be a state responsibility.

In 2005, in response to *Uniform failure*<sup>6</sup>, a Citizens Advice report on the drop in LEA provision of school uniform grants, the Welsh Assembly launched a uniform grant scheme for each eligible child entering year seven. The grant is available for all children entitled to free school meals and initially set at £85 has already increased to £95. In launching the scheme Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong learning stated that '*...uniform... helps provide a sense of identity, promotes discipline, helps reduce inequalities between pupils and ensures pupils are dressed appropriately for learning.*'<sup>7</sup> But she acknowledged that buying the uniform for the start of secondary school can present a financial burden on low income families. The grant was not intended to replace grant schemes that already existed in 16 of the 22 local authorities but to provide extra support at a time of greatest need.<sup>8</sup>

Parents are most likely to struggle to afford their child's uniform if the schools' uniform policy includes 'branded' items that are high cost because they are only

available from one specialist outfitter. DfES guidance to schools in England explicitly discourages the use of such policies. The guidance also states that *'No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling socially excluded. This applies both to existing and prospective pupils. It is not acceptable for parents of prospective pupils to be deterred from applying to the school of their choice because they are unable to meet the cost of its school uniform'*. It suggests uniform policies should be simple and colour-based with items available at a variety of stores to enable parents to shop around.

Taking advantage of the high-profile competition between supermarkets is something that many parents are simply unable to do. Many schools still seem unaware of the DfES guidance and continue to insist on 'branded' items only available from one store. This causes problems for many parents.

Surveys by a number of Citizens Advice Bureaux in the last year have found that most secondary schools require some of their uniform items to be purchased from a specialist outfitter. Some schools show evidence of having thought about costs when introducing new items, phasing in the changes over a number of years. One commented that they had withdrawn an expensive coat from the policy as a result of complaints. But another was about to introduce limited requirements for skirts and coats. Some examples of good practice were found in relation to reducing costs to parents but overall many of the Citizens

Advice Bureaux monitoring the issue expressed concern over the sometimes unrealistic estimations of cost.



**A CAB in Sussex advised a lone parent on income support who was struggling to meet her child's expensive school uniform requirements. She had received a £35 uniform grant from the local council in September 2005 which was expected to have lasted her two years but did not even cover the cost of her child's blazer. The blazer itself cost £65 and she was worried that meeting the full cost would push her into debt.**

**A Kent CAB reported the struggle of one parent who was forced to buy a specific style shirt for her son for just the summer term only. Each shirt cost £12.50 and he would need at least two. He would not be able to wear it outside of school as it had a school logo on it.**

The Office of Fair Trading has received numerous complaints from parents regarding the high prices and poor quality of school uniforms. Its recent study found that 84 per cent of schools with a uniform policy restrict the choice of supplier for at least one item. Compulsory items purchased from designated retailers or schools were found to be on average 23 per cent more expensive than in uniform retailers generally, and 150 per cent more expensive than in supermarkets.<sup>9</sup>

**In February a client visited a Yorkshire CAB concerned that she had been unable to afford new school uniforms for her three children. She had recently moved into the area and her old LEA gave her grants for school uniform, but the new one didn't, apparently because the uniforms were not compulsory. Despite the official line that uniforms at primary schools were not compulsory, the client's children were embarrassed at feeling different from the other children.**

**A woman sought help from a Sussex CAB because her children were being bullied at school because their uniforms were worn out and she couldn't afford to replace items. They were a couple on a low income as her husband was disabled and needed care. Their local council had just cut its uniform grant scheme.**

In recognition of the growing problem faced by low-income families, last year the Family Welfare Association (FWA), a charity with a long history of providing grants to individuals and families in need, launched a new partnership with Barclaycard to provide school-related grants. The Barclaycard Horizons project<sup>10</sup> provides FWA with additional funds to provide grants for low income families that are headed by a lone parent to help with school costs, including uniforms, school trips and after-school clubs. In the past year, the average level of grant awarded was £171.00 – almost four times the size of the average grant awarded by Local Authorities. In total the FWA was able to give around £44,000 to around 600 children primarily to help with meeting school uniform costs.

Geographically the largest number of FWA grants were made to families living in London, which is unsurprising given that that 39 per cent of all children in the capital – 624,000 children<sup>11</sup> – are living in poverty and that overall children living in London face nearly twice the risk of living in poverty than those elsewhere in the country.

Yet, despite London's significant poverty problem, the number of local authority grant schemes operating in the region has declined in recent years and over a third of London boroughs now provide no financial support whatsoever to families to meet school costs. Fig.1 provides a breakdown of grant awards made to families by FWA in the past year.

Large families are particularly vulnerable to poverty and, as might be expected, FWA's grants data reveals that most applicants have more children than the average lone parent family. While latest figures from the Office of National Statistics reveal that the average lone parent family comprises 1.7 children, FWA's grant data finds that the among grant recipient families the average number of children is almost 2.4 – significantly higher than the national average.

Around half of lone parent families are poor, nearly double the rate of child poverty in the population as a whole.<sup>12</sup> When asked in a recent survey by One Parent Families what they disliked most about having to manage on a tight budget, lone parents ranked being unable to pay for their child(ren) to take part in social or school-related activities as the third most important issue, after the inability to have a family holiday or engage in other social activities.

**Rachel is a lone parent with five school-aged children and lives in Cornwall. Her support worker wrote: "I am writing in support of the enclosed application for a grant for Rachel who desperately needs to buy her eldest sons, C and M, new school uniforms. She has mental health problems and has recently parted from the father of the youngest two children due to domestic violence. Her sons are both large and C in particular has grown substantially in recent months. Rachel has been unable to replace their uniforms or PE kits as required and I am aware that the boys have begun to miss days from school because they do not have the appropriate clothing. I know that Rachel would be very grateful for any financial help you might be able to offer her."**

***FWA awarded a grant of £200 towards the costs of school uniform***

**Fig. 1**

Region	Average grant award per family	Number of families	Number of child beneficiaries
Anglia	£191.00	31	74
London	£171.50	76	191
Midlands	£188.30	36	89
North East	£187.80	18	38
North West	£155.80	17	36
Scotland	£166.70	3	5
South Central	£170.30	12	29
South East	£158.80	21	46
South West	£163.90	18	42
Wales	£154.80	21	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>£170.89</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>600</b>

## Conclusions and recommendations

The Government has committed to tackling child poverty in the UK, yet there remains much to do to combat the isolation and exclusion experienced by children in families that are unable to meet the costs of schooling. There is a role for a range of stakeholders – teachers, parents, governors, and local and central government – to take co-ordinated action to improve the current situation and to enable all children to take advantage of the opportunities that school offers.

Whilst improvements made by the DfES in the last couple of years to strengthen their guidance to schools on uniform policies have been very welcome, it is disappointing that they have done little to ensure that schools follow the guidance. We hope that the inclusion of a section on uniforms in the schools' admission code produced alongside the Education and Inspections Bill will

increase compliance with good practice. The code addresses the issue of affordability and highlights how particular policies around uniform and other school costs can undermine fair admissions arrangements. We hope that that this section will be strengthened in the final version of the code and that its inclusion will provide opportunities for ensuring that compliance with DfES guidance on uniform policies is monitored and enforced.

Specifically, we recommend:

- local authority scrutiny committees should undertake enquires into the costs of schooling in the area to ascertain the financial burden on families and to review what support is available to low-income families
- school governing bodies should ensure that their school uniform is kept simple, and is available from more than one outlet

- all schools should ensure that their equal opportunities policy includes a commitment to the inclusion of all children in school activities, regardless of ability to pay
- as part of the school inspection process OFSTED should ensure that school policies promote the inclusion of children from low-income families
- DfES should produce a model charging policy for schools, outlining good practice in charging for trips and all costs associated with schooling
- the DfES should ensure that compliance with Government guidance on uniform policies is monitored and enforced. They should ensure that clear channels are available to parents who are unhappy with uniform policies to raise their concerns
- the Government should consider placing a statutory duty on local authorities to provide school uniform grants for children whose families are in receipt of maximum child tax credit. Central government should make funds available in the next spending review to enable local authorities to provide grants.

## Practical tips for schools, by schools

### Uniform

- School clothing should be kept simple, and be available from more than one outlet. If branding is required, it is cheaper (and provides families with greater choice of supplier) if badges can be sewn on to plain clothing that is machine washable.
- Schools can work together to reduce the cost to parents. For example, if a primary school uniform is the same colour as that of the secondary it feeds, clothing can be carried over from one school to another.
- A second hand clothing outlet in the school or local community allows parents to buy cheaper uniform – encouraging pupils and parents to donate uniform when it is no longer needed. Emphasising the 'recycling' aspect of such a scheme will make it less stigmatising for parents buying cheaper clothing.
- Parents should be provided with as much information as possible about the help available to them.
- Uniform should not be changed unnecessarily, and parents should be given advance notice to help them spread the cost.

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<sup>1</sup> Ridge, T Childhood poverty and social exclusion: from a child's perspective. Bristol: The Policy Press (2002)

<sup>2</sup> [citizensadvice.org.uk/schools\\_leaflet\\_5\\_final.pdf](http://citizensadvice.org.uk/schools_leaflet_5_final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The cost of schooling, DfES (2004)

<sup>4</sup> Norwich Union press release (16 August 2006)

<sup>5</sup> School uniform: Help with school uniform costs: Update, Citizens Advice (2004)

<sup>6</sup> *Uniform failure*: Citizens Advice, January 2001

<sup>7</sup> Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, National Assembly for Wales Press Release, 20 June 2005

<sup>8</sup> The grant scheme was introduced following a motion put forward by Huw Lewis AM in a Debate under Standing Order No. 29: Legislation on Financial Support for School Clothing, 4 June 2003

<sup>9</sup> *Supply of school uniforms review*, OFT, September 2006

<sup>10</sup> The Horizons programme is a partnership between Barclaycard, Citizens Advice, Family Welfare Association, One Parent Families and Parentline Plus. For more information see [barclaycard.co.uk/horizons](http://barclaycard.co.uk/horizons)

<sup>11</sup> Figures are for 2004/05 (a three year rolling average). Households below average income statistics, 2006. Poverty is defined as living in a household below 60 per cent of median income, after housing costs.

<sup>12</sup> Households below average income statistics, Department for Work and Pensions, 2006.