

ASTI Submission to Consultation

on

New Circular on School Uniform and Other Costs

December 2016

Introduction

The ASTI welcomes the Departmental consultation. This is a long overdue initiative given the consistent evidence on the high costs of education to parents. In this submission, the ASTI will not directly comment on the four items listed in the appendix to the consultation invitation. These issue cannot be adequately addressed outside a broader examination of financing of education. Moreover, it would be remiss of the ASTI, as both a trade union and the professional voice of second-level teachers, to ignore the wider factors which result in a displacement of the costs of education from the State to families.

The Programme for Government underlines the centrality of education in securing broader social and economic goals. It states that:

“No child should be left behind in economic recovery and we should use our strengthening economy to become a leader in the provision of world-class education and skills.” (p.6)

The Action Plan on Education builds on this vision and pledges to break cycles of disadvantage. Its programme of 139 Actions aims to make the Irish education and training system the best in Europe. The ASTI supports this vision but must underline that it cannot be achieved without a concomitant commitment to investment in education.

The cost of education to families – the evidence

The 2016 OECD Education at a Glance Report underlines the steady decline in investment in education compared to other OECD and EU economies. Not only is Ireland’s expenditure on second-level as a percentage of GDP below the OECD and the EU average, actual investment in each second-level students’ education in Ireland is also less than the OECD and EU average. (OECD 2016:198-232) Notwithstanding successive Governments prioritising of education as central to social and economic progress, investment in education has lagged behind that of similarly developed economies. Under-investment in education has resulted in a displacement of the

As far back as 1978, the ESRI provided the first systematic evidence base on educational expenditure and the shifting of indirect costs on to parents. (Tussing 1978) It highlighted the way in which the introduction of free secondary education facilitated increased educational participation rates but without providing additional resources for the educational system itself. Instead, families had to meet many of the real costs of education such as uniforms, books and some curricular activities. This analysis remains pertinent forty years later.

2015 was the tenth anniversary of the annual Barnardos’ School Costs Survey. (Barnardos 2016) The series provides sobering evidence of the financial – and psychological health - burden faced by families in meeting the costs of education. These costs are not confined to school uniforms, books or “voluntary contributions” at the beginning of the school year. Throughout the year, parents must also pay the following costs – and the list is not exhaustive:

- ✓ payment for materials for subjects – Home Economics, Art, Music, PE
- ✓ donations to school fund-raising activities
- ✓ fees to sit State examinations, including ‘mock examinations’

- ✓ purchase of examination papers
- ✓ fees for Transition Year
- ✓ locker “deposits”
- ✓ lunch money
- ✓ transport costs
- ✓ evening study
- ✓ school visits to theatre, college open days, national exhibitions eg Young Scientist and Young Social Innovators
- ✓ sports activities
- ✓ retreats/well-being activities
- ✓ school tours

An insight into how the costs of education have become a deeply entrenched part of families financial commitments is provided by the following quotation from ZurichLife, which estimates that in 2015, the back-to-school costs for a second-level pupil averages at €1,040 per annum.

“Education in Ireland is supposed to be free, but each year back-to-school costs are rising for families. The cost of putting just one child through school can easily run into tens of thousands of euro. If you have two or more children then you're going to have to dig even deeper to sustain the cost of their educational needs over the long-term.” (ZurichLife 2016)

Further evidence of the high costs of education to parents is provided by the National Consumer Agency which provides a 36-item back-to-school budget planner. It has also become customary for other financial institutions, including Credit Unions and Banks to publish annual surveys on back to school costs as part of commercial advertising to current and prospective customers. (National Consumer Agency 2016)

The series of ASTI MillwardBrown research from 2011 to 2016 provides further evidence of increased displacement of costs of education to families as a result of austerity policies. For example, over this period, In response to cuts in capitation grants, the abolition of subject-specific and equipment, schools had to resort to increasing the voluntary contribution; more fundraising; charges for classroom materials; cuts to subsidies for out-of-school activities; more fundraising.

Lack of free education undermines public policy

These developments should be of concern to Government. Education is the prime force for social mobility in Ireland and education policy is committed to equity of opportunity and outcomes. Displacing the costs of education directly onto the persons participating in this public service undermines the goal of social inclusion. Lack of free education also reinforces inequality which is *“a real and growing threat to Ireland’s prosperity”*. (TASC 2016) In tandem with economic recovery, there is growing economic inequality and high levels of persistent poverty. For example, the most recent CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)

found that in 2005, 14.8% of the Irish population experienced deprivation: a decade later this had almost doubled to 29% (CSO 2016)

Lack of free education reinforces inequalities in educational outcomes

Forcing families to bear a significant burden of the costs of education also reinforces the well-documented patterns of social class inequalities in educational outcomes (Smith 2016). Almost half of Junior Cycle students do not attend their nearest school: parental choice in education is largely driven by socio-economic status.(ibid) Moreover, the majority of students (69%) from lower socio-economic status are not in DEIS schools and do not have access to the DEIS supports. (Ibid)) The ESRI longitudinal study which culminated in the report, *Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post School Transitions (ESRI 2014)*, provides consistent evidence of social class inequalities in educational outcomes. Its concurrent longitudinal study, *Growing Up in Ireland*, confirms this evidence base. Its 2016 Report on the educational and early work experiences of 17/18 year olds concluded with the following:

“Perhaps one of the most concerning issues to emerge from the figures presented in this Key Finding is the extent to which attitudes towards and performance in the education system are related to various measures of social advantage.”(p.11)

Funding second-level schools

In addition to historically inadequate investment in education, the model of funding of second level schools contributes to the displacement of education costs onto families. The 2013 ESRI Report – *Governance and Funding of Secondary Schools in Ireland* – is the first systematic analysis of the variation in funding and governance across sectors. While noting the difficulties in making comparisons across sectors due to the different funding models, it found that voluntary secondary schools, notwithstanding equalisation measures to provide for school secretaries and caretakers, “receive a significantly lower proportion of funding from the state and, as a result, are more reliant on voluntary contributions from parents and general fund-raising” (ESRI 2013 p.146) While the other sectors had more adequate funding mechanisms, they also had to resort to funding from non-State sources to meet running costs. (ibid p.154) It is a matter of concern that the Report repeatedly referred both to the lack of *transparency* in funding structures for the day-to-day management of schools and also to the variation in the extent to which various aspects of school governance across the sectors are financed by the State. The report concluded that a sustainable model of school funding must be created to meet demographic demand and which is based on student *need* rather than on sector type. (ibid p.157) The demographic demand is already in full flow and it is now time for the Government to act on this report.

Stress on families

The financial costs of education are a major source of stress for family finances. The annual Barnardos’ school costs survey provides incontrovertible evidence of the extent of this stress, as does the extensive media coverage of back-to-schools costs each September. Parents have to make difficult choices between paying utility bills and buying basics such as shoes and books. The cutbacks in the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowances have gravely

impacted on the very families who need this assistance the most. (In 2011, the budget for these allowances was €90m: in 2016 it was €38.8m.)

However, the stress on families is not confined to juggling scarce financial resources to “*make ends meet*”. It is of a more insidious nature as parents feel that their children are missing out on educational opportunities which are part-and-parcel of their school’s educational programme. Despite the best effort of schools to subsidise costs for activities such as a visit to the theatre to view the drama featuring in the certificate examinations; the school tour; the bus trip to support the school team in the final; the visit to third level open day; the out-of-school retreat for 6th years, there is always a financial cost for families. It should also be noted that a further hidden dimension of the impact of financial stress on families is the stigma of poverty experienced by family members. The Growing Up in Ireland reports provide solid evidence of the impact of poverty and financial stress on young children’s self-esteem and sense of well-being.

Report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tackling Back-to-School Costs

The need for a “culture change” in education policy to realise the goal of free education was highlighted in the 2013 Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection Report on Tackling Back to School Costs. This neglected report presented a set of recommendations under six headings which go beyond the narrow scope of items in the current consultation. The report noted evidence that the “*relationship between families and the school community is being compromised by the financial demands placed on parents*”. (JOC 2013: 19) It forcibly stated that the relationship between parents and their children’s school should be “*educational, and not financial*”. (ibid) It also noted with concern the lack of engagement by many school patron bodies with aspects of school financing. The report presents a set of 18 proposals to reduce educational costs for parents, including those relating to school uniform, school books, voluntary contributions, curricular and extra-curricular activities and uniform costs.

Education (Parents and Students Charter) Bill 2016

The implementation of JOC 2013 report’s recommendations should be a priority for the Minister for Education & Skills in advance of the finalisation of an Education (Parents and Students Charter) Bill 2016. The proposals in the latter to address the costs of education via a Charter fail to acknowledge the structural and systemic issues which results in high hidden costs of education to families. In tandem, the Minister must revisit the conclusions and recommendations of the 2013 ESRI report and devise a new model of financing second level schools which not only addresses historical funding anomalies but ensures that investment is focused on meeting students’ needs rather than institutional type.

References

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