

ASTI Observations on draft Circular on School Uniforms

The ASTI appreciates that this initiative is aimed at reducing costs of education to parents. In this regard, it would be helpful to make a brief reference to an ongoing “package” of such initiatives including the Circular in 2012 on school book rental schemes and the provision for cessation of paying deposits as part of enrolment application processes. This would contextualise the present initiative.

It would also be helpful if the Circular commenced with a statement which acknowledges the multiple important roles that school uniforms play in our education system. They serve as a symbol of the school and thus represent for many schools a long and proud tradition of service to students and the local community. Uniforms are also important in sustaining norms of student behaviour in school: students’ adherence to the dress code signifies engagement with the normative culture of the school, its code of behaviour and day-to-day rules. It is also important to remember that uniforms are instrumental in creating a sense of equality and a common identity among students. Anecdotally, it would seem that parents are particularly aware of the fact that school uniforms means that for five days of the week, their children are not anxious about their clothes and their “style statement”; the latter is costly enough to parents!

Having made these general observations, the ASTI must point out its objection to the general tone of the Circular. It seems to suggest that the uniform policy of the schools is imposed on the school community. In very many cases, Boards of Management, which include parents’ representatives, determine the uniform policy. A more balanced approach would acknowledge the duty of the Board to have more and better consultation with parents on uniform policy. In this regard, it is questionable as to whether the terminology of “ballot” is appropriate given the fact that the majority of schools have a uniform policy in place. A “ballot” on changing that policy will not necessarily be perceived as a priority by Boards of Management at this point in time. Instead, the Circular should refer to consultation with parents on school uniform policy.

In this regard, the first question on the draft questionnaire, *“Whether or not the school should have a uniform policy”*, is unclear. Does it mean should the school have a policy on having a school uniform in the first instance? Or does it mean should the school have a policy on aspects of the uniform? The distinction is clear enough in the draft Circular but is not so in the draft questionnaire.

The ASTI would also underline the duty of the Board to consult with students – irrespective of whether the Student Council is functioning or not. As noted above, the school uniform is an important dimension of a school’s code of behaviour. At the same time, students frequently complain about aspects of the uniform policy and their voice deserves to be heard. They are, after all, the persons who wear the uniform.

In conclusion, the ASTI commends the initiative of the Minister for Education & Skills to seek to reduce the costs of education to families. It must point out however, that families are obliged to meet many other costs of education – in particular through the “voluntary contribution”. The latter is required to meet basic running costs in schools. On top of such contributions, parents must also pay for materials for their children’s practical classes, for book rental, for visiting speakers, for Certificate Examinations, for out-of-school educational activities, etc, etc. Cumulatively, such costs can amount to several hundred euros per second level student per annum. The cutbacks in educational funding, particularly those introduced in the earlier budgets, continue to affect the day-to-day life of students and schools. Invariably, these cutbacks can only be made up by asking parents to contribute more and more money to schools.

Reversing these cutbacks would make a more significant difference to reducing the costs of education to families than one-off initiatives such as the present exercise.