



END CHILD POVERTY NETWORK CYMRU
RHWYDWAITH DILEU TLODI PLANT CYMRU

A coalition of organisations working to end child poverty in Wales

The Cost of Education

Every child in Wales has a right to free education. However, a child's education can come at a high cost for parents and carers. School has the potential to provide all children with the opportunity to learn, make friends and participate in a range of events and activities, regardless of family background, income and other defining factors. School can also act as a barrier in protecting children from the impact of living in poverty. Yet as parents are increasingly called upon to pay a considerable amount of money for school uniforms, trips, activities, transitional events, meals and classroom materials, school also has the potential to isolate, exclude and stigmatise children, especially those in low-income families. Every child in Wales may indeed have a right to free education, but these 'hidden' additional costs of schooling are exposing an increasing number of children and families to financial hardship. This briefing will highlight the central areas of concern and present a number of recommendations, making reference to key studies and reports.

Policy

The Welsh Assembly Government has pledged to eradicate child poverty in Wales by 2020 and have shown its commitment by prioritising it as one of their 7 Core Aims for all policy impacting on children and young people (WAG 2002). A number of programmes and initiatives have been introduced to support this, notable the Community First programme, Cymorth grants to targeted areas, free swimming and half-price bus fares in 4 local authority regions, and more recently, the pre-school Flying Start scheme. The WAG strategy for tackling child poverty in Wales, 'A Fair Future for our Children' was released last year and the implementation plan in respect of this strategy was issued in May 2006.

In respect of education policy relating to schools and which seeks to address the needs of vulnerable groups in poverty, programmes introduced include the free breakfast scheme for all primary schools in Wales, a means-tested school uniform grant for children entering Year 7, the 'Narrowing the Gap' report on school performances, means-tested free school meals scheme and the RAISE programme with targets funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils who are underachieving. Despite this encouraging focus on children in disadvantaged circumstances and communities, the emphasis to date has been primarily concerned with educational outcomes, behaviour and academic achievement. Less attention has arguably been paid to the additional costs within state education, which is causing real hardship and anxiety for many low-income families.

State school doesn't come cheap!

Recent research from Norwich Union's Schools Sums Index suggests that parents collectively pay a staggering £129 billion to put their children through state school at an average cost of

£14,000 per child. This is an increase of £40 billion in just four years and works out at around £1,300 per child per year, based on educating a child from five to sixteen. This includes money spent on school trips, sports kits, school uniforms, textbooks, school meals, transport, after-school activities and equipment. DfES figures from 2004 suggested a cost of £948 per year for a secondary school child and £563 for a child in primary education. It is unsurprising to learn from these findings that the majority of respondents in the two lowest income groups found associated costs difficult to meet. The increasing insistence by schools on the requirement to have a unique uniform to promote a distinct identity and to organise school trips and events to enhance experiences outside the classroom have been identified as key factors in putting pressure on low income families.

School uniforms

Despite the WAG's 'Guidance on School Uniform' stressing that cost considerations should be taken into account, practice varies between schools and little monitoring of adherence to these Guidelines is undertaken. According to the DfES study, the average cost of a school uniform (inc. PE kit) is around £286 per year, rising to £312 for boys, well exceeding the £95 one-off grant introduced by the WAG for families eligible for free school meals when a child transfers from primary to secondary education. Given that the latest figures indicate that there are 27% of children in Wales living in poverty and only 16% of school children entitled to free school meals, a significant number of families are therefore unable to access this much needed grant. The Family Welfare Association who provide grant assistance to help with the cost of school uniforms has witnessed a year on year increase in the number of parents applying, and through their Barclaycard funded Horizons project, gave out almost £50,000 in grants last year, which averaged around £173 per child. With a steady decline in the number of local authorities providing discretionary grants to low-income families, many families are reduced to borrowing money or purchase items through credit, pushing many families already in difficult circumstances further into debt. The amount of grant offered by those LEA who still operate such a scheme for secondary school pupils differs greatly, from £148 to as low as £20! (WAG 2006). As costs markedly increase, the help available to low income parents through grants has significantly declined.

Evidently, an increasing number of families are finding it more and more difficult to meet the rising costs of their children's school uniform. However, the responsibility for ensuring that education is inclusive lies not only with government, as there are changes schools could make to ease the financial burden on families (see also ECPN Cymru 2006). Many parents complain that not only are school uniforms expensive but that schools do not allow them a choice of where to buy their child's clothes. With many schools demanding a uniform or sports kit to be a certain design or style, complete with a school logo, parents are compelled to purchase items from school-nominated outlets or designated retailer, where costs can be significantly higher. This, along with the quality of school clothing, was the subject of a recent inquiry launched by the Office of Fair Trading, which reported last month. It found that 84% of schools that require pupils to have a uniform impose restrictions on the choice of supplier for at least one item of the uniform. Items purchased from designated retailers or schools were found to be 23% more expensive than in uniform retailers generally and a staggering 150% more expensive than supermarkets. The OFT study estimated that the total yearly detriment is £32m for parents with children in secondary education and £13m for those with children in primary schools (OFT 2006).

Citizen's Advice Bureaux have also reported that children have been disciplined or 'internally isolated' for attending school without the correct uniform despite the reason that their parents could not afford to buy the required item (Citizens Advice 2006).

School Trips

Though schools can only legally ask families for voluntary contributions to cover the costs of 'optional extras' such as school trips, many parents feel pressurised into paying for such activities, knowing that if they do not find the money, their child may be excluded from participating. With an average cost of school residential trips at around £186 (DfES 2004), these costs can be especially prohibitive. Children may also suffer academically if they are prevented from going on school trips linked to the curriculum and will also miss out on valuable time with their peers outside of the classroom. Yet despite the pressure exerted from schools on parents to contribute additional money, such costs are often well beyond the means of many low-income families. Access to funds which facilitate the involvement of pupils in school trips for children from low-income households was one of the many recommendations put forward in the WAG funded Child Poverty Task Group report (CPTG 2004).

Curricular expenses

An additional concern is the growing tendency for schools to set homework which requires pupils to have access to a computer to undertake research on the Internet. Whilst the benefits of this should not be underestimated, research has shown that only 41% of homes in Wales have access to such facilities, dropping to as low as 34% in mid/west Wales and 26% in the South Wales Valleys, regions which are among the most remote and economically deprived areas in the country (Welsh Consumer Council 2006). Although pupils can be excused from such work, this has implications in terms of stigma and marking individuals out as 'different', and schools are keen to encourage the use of school computer facilities at the end of the school day or alternatively, for pupils to access public libraries. However, there are clear cost implications for both pupils who remain in school in relation to accessing public transport and to travel to their local library, assuming of course that such amenities exist, a particular concern for families living in rural communities.

Increasingly, many parents of secondary school pupils are being requested to purchase equipment and materials to assist with their child's learning, from sketchbook for art, aprons for cooking, textbooks for examinations and books for reading. A more recent concern, which has also emerged, is the cost of transitional events, where pupils transferring from primary to secondary school are invited to an event organised by the school where a meal and overnight accommodation may be provided at a substantial cost to their parents. Increasingly, schools are also being encouraged to further develop after-school activities, which may include sports, arts, music, drama or language lessons. However, many activities are provided by peripatetic teachers and outside organisations whose fees inevitably exclude those families unable to meet costs. Without any consideration of a family's ability to pay, many after-school activities have become exclusive and excluding, denying large numbers of pupils opportunities to learn new skills and interests.

School meals

In Wales, local education authority maintained schools must provide a free midday meal to pupils if they (or their parents) receive income-based jobseekers allowance or income support, or if they are receiving support as asylum seekers. The school must also provide a free meal if a pupil's parent receives Child Tax Credit and their income is below a certain level or if they get the guarantee part of Pension Credit. Free school meals cannot be provided to other pupils, except to the children of students. Thus the majority of pupils must either pay for their school meal or else make alternative arrangements such as parents providing a packed lunch.

Whilst a great deal of recent media attention has focused on the quality of school meals, far less awareness has been raised in respect of the cost. School meals are expensive, a

particular pressure point for children whose family income is just above the free provision criteria and for large families where several children may be accessing meals within school. Costs across local authorities vary with the average cost of a school meal being £1.48 in primary schools and £1.59 in secondary schools (Unison 2005). This despite in some schools, meals being produced at a cost to the contractor of just 36p per day – less than the cost of meals served to prisoners.

Whilst many parents may opt for the cheaper option of providing a packed lunch, concerns have been raised over the quality of the food often provided, given the connections made between nutrition, child poverty and achievement. In addition, WAGs own figures have revealed that almost 1 in 4 of all children entitled to free school meals do not take them (23%) with even less amongst secondary school pupils (28%), with research indicating that stigma and fear of bullying are defining factors for not taking up their entitlements

“People don’t claim free school meals out of embarrassment. I would let people with money go ahead of me in the queue so they wouldn’t see” 12 year old boy, (Save the Children 2003)

These concerns raise important question in terms of how can we ensure that children are eating healthily in school, and at a price parents can afford. Several key child poverty organisations have collectively campaigned for universal free school meals to eradicate stigma and bullying, improve take-up whilst also reducing financial pressure on families (CPAG 2006). Recent news reports have also highlighted the link between children having a healthy meal and improved behaviour in the classroom. It is also worth recalling that during the post war years, Government covered the full cost of school meals and recent experiences from Hull City Council who have introduced free school meals for all, suggests that costs can be covered, take-up significantly increased and stigma removed.

Stigma and isolation

The consequences for those children whose families are unable to meet these costs are also of real concern. Socially, children may find themselves isolated, stigmatised or bullied, and academically they may unachieve without access to the necessary textbooks and lesson materials to be able to prepare for exams and participate in school based activities. Accounts by children involved in research echo these concerns

‘Children’s accounts of their school lives indicated that they were experiencing considerable disadvantage within their schools, with many reporting feeling bullied, isolated and left out at critical stages of their academic career’ (Ridge 2003)

Evidence from Wales has shown that children who dress differently, have free school meals and are unable to take part in social and curriculum-based activities are being stigmatised, left out and bullied which will inevitably impact on their emotional well-being and engagement with school.

Recommendations

The Welsh Assembly Government has made a clear commitment to tackle child poverty, though very little has been done to date to combat the exclusion and financial challenges faced by many children and families from the costs of schooling. A coordinated response is needed from government, local authorities, local education authorities, schools and school governors to allow all children to participate in the opportunities that school offers.

- The WAG guidance on school uniforms must be closely monitored to ensure that schools are adhering to its principles
- The WAG education and child poverty policies should focus on the 'additional costs' of school education and to seek solutions to the problems identified in this briefing
- The WAG should conduct a study into the feasibility of introducing a universal free school meal service for all school pupils across Wales, noting the contribution that leading child poverty organisations, Hull City Council and the recent Free School Meals Bill consultation in Scotland have made
- Cashless systems via plastic smart cards should be explored for school meal purchases as a means of reducing stigma and bullying, and increasing take up for children entitled to free school meals
- Schools should be provided with 'activity funds' to ensure that activities and school trips are open to all children
- WAG should make funds available for local authorities to provide grants for school uniforms at a realistic level
- WAG should revisit the recommendations of the Child Poverty Task Group report in respect of the participation of pupils in the school community, education and training.
- WAG, alongside the DfES should examine the conclusions of the recent OFT report into the cost of school uniforms

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End Child Poverty Network Cymru

The **End Child Poverty Network Cymru** is a coalition of concern focused on the eradication of child poverty in Wales, co-ordinated and managed on a day-to-day basis by Children in Wales. Its steering group include representation from across the voluntary and statutory sectors and the Network has an increasing supporting membership from a broad cross-section of agencies. The Network is supporting the Governments vision that no child in Wales should be living in poverty by 2020, and is working to achieve

- Increased public and professional understanding of child poverty in Wales
- Public and professional support for measures to tackle child poverty
- To ensure that policies are in place at all levels of government (local, Assembly and Westminster), which contribute to ending child poverty in Wales.

Steering Group members include

Barnardo's Cymru,
Children in Wales,
Save the Children Cymru,
NCH Cymru,
NSPCC Cymru,
Welsh Local Government Association
Communities that Care,
Fairbridge Cymru,
Citizens Advice Bureau,
the Frank Buttle Trust,
Shelter Cymru,
Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales
Childline Cymru
NPHS Wales

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