

NPFS Focus Group – Cost of the school day

21/8/17, Memorial Hall, Lanark. 9 participants. Mix of parents with children in both primary and secondary schools in Lanarkshire.

Is the school day affordable? How much does the cost of the school day affect parents?

Increasing costs and decreasing incomes, a double bind for parents

There was consensus amongst parents that the gap in affordability of the school day was widening. Parents remarked that costs were increasing in most aspects of school life, while real incomes and benefits were decreasing, and this was compounded by reducing school income. One parent explained how this was leading to an ever-expanding circle of families finding the costs of the school day unaffordable, stating that it was not just those families on benefits, but working families previously managing, who were now feeling the strain.

Impacts of rising unaffordability

There was a clear feeling that the costs associated with school, both at primary and secondary level, represented a serious concern for many parents. Parents were finding the costs more “noticeable”, because it was not just them that were “strapped for cash”, but “everyone”, including “schools and the government”. There was a general sense that the situation had worsened for parents and that costs were having a greater impact on them.

What are the main costs associated with school?

School meals

Parents saw the cost of school meals as an issue for many families who did not receive free school meals. Two clear themes emerged from discussion of this topic. The first was a lack of value for money due to poor quality food, the second was a lack of options available to children, as well as large variations in school menus across Scotland.

“The difference in menus in Scotland is unbelievable, even between the North and South, North Lanarkshire is much better”

“In some schools they are getting much better meals, I’d be happy to pay for that!”

Parents emphasised that good quality food for their children was a priority. Several stated that they would be very willing to pay the cost of school meals if they felt that the food their child received was good value for money, but they did not feel this was currently the case.

“The cheese isn’t cheese, it’s rubber...with a flour dusting on top”

Parents mentioned that the number of options had decreased in schools. This meant some children were going hungry rather than eating the meals provided.

For one parent, the lack of options had led to a particularly distressing situation. Her son, whom she described as having always been hard to cook for, had not been eating at school, as there was nothing he wanted to eat on the school menu. When teachers picked up on this, she was told that it was her responsibility to make sure her son had something that he would eat. This led to embarrassment as she did not have the money to provide an alternative, and even if she did, there was no guarantee that he would eat what she had packed for him.

"There's no option for a breakfast club where I am."

"I couldn't get him to eat anything off the school dinner tray."

"Sometimes by the time they get to the canteen there's nothing left."

"There's no longer a free carton of juice...it's just tap water...or you have to pay for milk."

Parents felt that, with rising costs, the issue of good quality, cheap school meals had become more important, as for some children this might be *"the only hot meal they got all day"*.

Uniform

The cost of school uniform represented a concern for parents. They felt that many struggled to afford everything their children needed to be fully kitted out for school. Bursaries for school uniform were seen as inadequate as they did not cover much of the uniform cost and there was a delay in reimbursement. Parents were aware that these bursaries varied significantly between local authority areas.

Example:

- One example was parents receiving £50 towards the cost of school uniform. The cost of the blazer alone was £48, so this grant left no money for other essentials. One parent remarked that reimbursement was not given at the time of purchasing items, but later in term, making it difficult for them to budget for the month.

Trips

Short notice was one of the main issues in being able to afford trips for school. Several parents mentioned having little to no warning about impending trips which had led to difficulties in being able to hand deposits in on time.

The issue of feeling that you had to pay for trips was particularly applicable in primary schools because of their size and the fact that all pupils went on trips:

"In Secondary Schools, trips are extortionate but you don't feel obliged to go."

It was felt that in secondary schools there would be a big enough majority not attending trips that it wouldn't feel so excluding for students. In primary schools there was thought to be "*more pressure*" to attend.

Charity days and optional extras

Parents felt strongly about charity days and optional extras. Though events such as mufti and world book days were supposedly optional, parents felt strongly that in practice these were obligatory, because they could not see their child excluded or 'left out'. A similar sentiment was felt with regard to extras such as class photos, school parties, seasonal cards and school productions.

"You can choose not to pay, it's an option, but as a parent it's not really, when everyone is getting their Christmas cards and your child's left out."

Parents told stories of their children being humiliated and made to stand out for not having the right money on mufti days, or a costume on world book day. Another parent mentioned that they had been given £10 of raffle tickets, with no notification, which they were expected to sell.

"There's pressure on kids to raise money for parties."

There was concern that schools were raising significant sums for charity when some of their own parents were under significant financial strain.

However, most parents felt that some charitable fund raising and giving was important as *"Our children need to be aware that there are others less fortunate."*

Rural specific issues

Parents felt that there were certain costs of the school day which were specifically rural issues. Transport costs were particular pertinent to rural areas.

Examples:

- Clubs and extra-curricular activities were felt to suffer in rural areas because of the available of just one bus in and one bus back and the costs of additional bussing to and from these, especially after school and for those children living a long distance from school. The cost of transport for trips was seen as particularly high for rural areas. Parents described how, even if the trip itself was free, the transport there could cost enough to act as a barrier to attending.
- Rural schools being generally smaller was seen as another issue with the concomitant problems of feeling different or left out if some activity or contribution could not be afforded.

Digital Exclusion

Parents thought that the cost of equipment needed at home for school was unaffordable for some parents. They explained how:

“There’s just an assumption that children have everything”.

This assumption was felt to be wrong. Parents believed many families to still experience digital exclusion, but that the issue extended further than simply whether there was a family laptop available or not. With more and more homework being based online, parents felt that there were equally more and more resources they were required to have.

“You might have a computer but not a printer....or a printer but not broadband”.

Parents told stories of how their child had been penalised for not having handed in their homework on time, and that their child had felt too embarrassed to admit this was due to a lack of resources at home.

Underlying issues and potential responses

Culture and attitude of school

The culture and attitude of a school was felt to play a large part in determining whether costs were manageable or not. There was a clear divide between the way parents from schools in Lanark described costs being handled, and a parent in Glasgow. The parent in Glasgow explained that affordability was factored into everything at their child’s school. Creative solutions were found where there were issues of high costs involved, for example:

- On World Book Day children simply had “*to wear red*”, meaning parents did not have to worry about buying a new outfit for their child
- Class photos had been changed to be once every two years, reducing costs
- There were lengthy planning and payment periods for school trips.

Small changes such as these were felt to have a big impact for whether parents were able to afford the costs of the school day. Creating a positive and involving atmosphere was important, making parents feel like allies to their head teacher rather than being alienated from them.

Awareness and sensitivity

Parents felt that some teachers and head teachers lacked awareness that the cost of the school day was unaffordable for some. This was felt to be specific to areas such as Lanark where deprivation may be less apparent (this was in comparison to areas of Glasgow where a majority of pupils may be living in poverty). Hidden poverty was felt to be translating into a lack of sensitivity around this topic. Parents felt that:

"...there should be some kind of way of letting people know that there are issues".

Parents wished awareness, and practical actions relating to this, to become normalised; part of the day-to-day-thinking by teachers and head teachers.

A lack of transparency

One clear thread running throughout the discussion was a lack of transparency as to how funds were being used in schools. This was particularly true for money accrued through fundraisers. For example, parents told us that at their school £12,000 had been raised in one year. They were given a rough breakdown of how this money was utilised by the school, but felt this was fairly undecipherable, and that far too much of the budget had gone to charities.

"The findings were done in percentages...it was vague in the extreme"

Parents were similarly confused by the costs of certain trips and parties. One parent felt bemused as to how a party could cost £300, especially as their child still had to pay to attend, that they began to work out the costs themselves:

"I started writing it all out...I wanted to know how they got to £300, I could do it for much less."

This lack of openness about costs, as well as a feeling of no control over where money was spent, had made many parents feel disengaged from their children's school.

Parents felt that if there was more transparency then they would feel less resentful paying for things, that it would prevent misconceptions, and that it would mean parental priorities could be taken into account.

Timing and planning

Parents felt that more careful timing and planning would make school costs much more affordable.

Parents remarked that they would often receive a *'barrage of costs'* all at once, with little or no notice, which some could not feasibly pay. This was particularly true for certain periods of the year, such as the start of the academic year and the run up to Christmas.

Examples:

- Parents described how, at the start of the academic year, after just buying school uniform, they had been hit with a £50 deposit for a trip with only a short period to pay. There had been uncertainty over whether this trip had been going ahead and parents had not had the time to budget for this expense.
- The run up to Christmas was seen as a particularly bad time due to the combination of many school events and it being a period in which they were already spending a lot. One parent felt:

"I'm frightened to open the school bag every day....it was one thing after another"

There were many suggestions as to how to improve timing and planning so that costs were manageable. These included:

- Spreading costs out across the year so that there were no periods where many came at once
- Planning trips months in advance and sending letters out to parents notifying them clearly of this
- Option of paying for trips and optional extras in instalments
- A letter sent out at the beginning of the year showing all deadlines termly, so avoiding nasty surprises
- Creative cheap alternatives to various charity days and events
- Avoidance of too many costs at the start of the year and in the run up to Christmas.

Incorporating charity giving into learning

Although parents mentioned funding charities as a significant cost of the school day, they equally did not feel that this should stop altogether. Parents believed that it was important for their children to learn about those "*less fortunate*" than themselves, and saw giving to charity as a vital part of that. They were clear that the issue was not funding charities itself, but a lack of choice and agency over which charities they were funding.

It was suggested that parents should be involved in deciding which charities they were donating to, and that a balance should be struck between giving locally and globally. One parent mentioned that at their school a third went to local charities, a third to international charities and a third to the school. It was felt that this model could be adopted by other schools.

Another idea was linking giving to charity to the curriculum. Parents stated that they would be happier donating to a charity if their children were learning about it and why it was important, in their lessons.

Rocket Science UK Ltd, 25 August 2017