
COST OF SCHOOLING 2007

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Introduction

This research brief presents findings from the Cost of Schooling 2007 study, carried out by BMRB on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

The 2007 study updates findings from a study of the cost of schooling in 2003, commissioned and published by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2004. Both studies investigated the additional costs to parents/carers of sending a child to maintained primary and secondary school in England.

Key findings

- The total amount spent by parents/carers in 2007 was, on average, £683.79 for a child at primary school and £1,195.47 for a child at secondary school.
- Overall costs had increased very slightly (after adjusting for inflation) since 2003. The average increase was £34 (a 4 per cent increase).
- Most parents/carers were happy overall with the costs associated with their child's schooling: 23 per cent were very happy and 60 per cent were quite happy. However, 13 per cent of parents/carers were not very happy and 3 per cent were not at all happy with the costs. This represents a slight decline in happiness since 2003.
- Six per cent of parents/carers said they found it very difficult to meet the costs associated with their child's schooling and 32 per cent found it quite difficult; while 47 per cent of parents/carers found it quite easy and 14 per cent found it very easy. This represents a slight decline in ease of meeting costs since 2003.
- Families with incomes of less than £15,000 were less likely to be happy with the costs of schooling, and more likely to find it hard to meet the costs compared to families with higher incomes.

Background and research questions

Although education in maintained schools is nominally free, there are a number of costs to parents/carers associated with a child's education that can have an impact on family budgets.

In 2004, the then DfES commissioned a study to investigate the costs associated with sending a child to maintained school in England, and parents'/carers' attitudes to those costs (DfES Research Report 588). In 2008, the DCSF commissioned a follow-up study to update the findings and investigate change over time. The studies investigated costs that were incurred in the calendar years 2003 and 2007.

The research questions for the study of costs in 2007 included:

- What are the costs to parents and carers when sending their children to maintained primary and secondary schools in England?
- What voluntary contributions are parents and carers asked for by schools?
- What arrangements do schools have for asking for contributions?
- What happens if parents and carers are unable to meet certain costs?
- What role do children play (if any) in mediating what parents and carers pay for or know about?
- How do costs vary across different types of schools and across year groups?
- Have costs to parents and carers increased or decreased in real terms since 2003?
- Have there been any changes in the nature of what parents and carers are required or requested to pay for, and what is the impact of any change?
- Are parents/carers happy or unhappy with the costs of schooling, and have their views changed since 2003?
- Do parents/carers find it easy or difficult to meet the costs of schooling, and has this changed since 2003?

Methodology

The study involved three strands:

- A telephone survey of an achieved representative sample of 1,500 parents/carers of children aged 5 to 16 attending maintained schools in England, using random digit dialling.
- A self-completion survey of maintained primary and secondary schools, with postal and online response options. Questionnaires were completed by 147 primary schools (a 38 per cent response rate) and 61 secondary schools (a 19 per cent response rate).

- A face-to-face survey of an achieved representative sample of 1,166 children aged 10 to 16 (using BMRB's Youth Omnibus survey).

The samples for these three strands were not linked. Fieldwork for all three strands of the research took place between March and June 2008. (In the previous study, the parents/carers and schools fieldwork took place between February and April 2004, and the fieldwork with children between April and June 2004.)

In addition, a literature review was conducted to identify and synthesise findings from other research on the costs of schooling. Findings from the literature review can be found in the full report.

When comparing 2003 costs with 2007 costs, 2003 costs have been adjusted for inflation using the Retail Price Index.

Main findings

Total annual spending

The average total amount spent by parents/carers on the costs associated with a child's primary school education in 2007 was £683.79, and for secondary school children the average was £1,195.47.

Costs were generally higher for boys than girls:

- At primary school, the average total amount was £691.88 for boys compared to £675.59 for girls.
- At secondary school, the average total amount was £1,235.09 for boys compared to £1,153.74 for girls.

Costs were lower on average for households with incomes of less than £15,000 per year – although not substantially lower:

- For those with household incomes of less than £15,000, the average total amounts were £646.67 at primary school and £1,117.16 at secondary school.
- For those with household incomes of £15,000 or more, the average total amounts were £695.58 at primary school and £1,236.40 at secondary school.

On average the total amount parents/carers spent on their child's education had increased by £34 since 2003 (after adjusting for inflation). This represents a 4 per cent increase in the costs of schooling.

Even though the overall costs have risen slightly, the cost of many individual items/activities has decreased or remained about the same since 2003. This suggests that parents/carers on average paid for more items/activities in 2007 than they did in 2003.

Uniform and PE kit

Almost all parents/carers (98 per cent) said that their child's school required children to wear a uniform. Where a uniform was required, the total annual cost of uniform was £184.17 on average, and higher for secondary school children than for primary school children (£211.60 compared to £163.72). In secondary schools, the total annual cost was higher for boys than girls (£219.57 compared with £203.21), due to greater spending on school shoes. The most expensive items of uniform were shoes and blazers.

Individual items of uniform tended to cost less in 2007 than in 2003, although parents/carers tended to buy more items in 2007 than they did in 2003. On average, the total cost of school uniform in 2007 was £184.17 compared to £179.47 in 2003 (adjusted for inflation); however, socks were not included in the 2003 total cost, and these cost an average of £10 in 2007.

Nine in ten parents/carers said their child needed some form of PE kit, with more specialist and seasonal items being more common in secondary schools. As these items tended to be relatively expensive, the total cost of PE kit in 2007 was much higher for children at secondary school than at primary school (on average £129.74 compared with £53.22, where PE kit was required). In secondary schools, this total cost was higher for boys than girls (£155.26 compared with £102.11), because of the cost of football or rugby shirts and boots.

Overall, the average cost of PE kit in 2007 was £87.22, slightly lower than in 2003 after adjusting for inflation (the adjusted 2003 cost was £89.42, and did not include socks, while the 2007 cost did).

One in six parents/carers (17 per cent) said that all items of uniform and PE kit had to be bought from a designated shop or the school itself, while 22 per cent said that all items could be bought from anywhere (the remainder said that only some items had to be bought from the school or a designated shop). Restrictions were more likely to be in place in secondary than primary schools. These figures were very similar to those obtained in 2003, despite recent DCSF guidance to schools¹ that items should be available from a wide variety of outlets instead of a sole supplier.

The majority of parents/carers said that at least one item of uniform required a logo (97 per cent in secondary schools and 80 per cent in primary schools). In most of these cases (79 per cent), the items had to be bought with the logo, rather than being sewn on.

Overall, one in three parents/carers said that second hand uniform was available from the school, either to buy or free of charge, and where this was the case the total cost of uniform was lower, in both primary and secondary schools. Four per cent of parents/carers said that they received financial help with buying their child's school uniform. This figure was 11 per cent for those with an annual income of less than £10,000 per year. The overall proportion of parents/carers receiving financial help has not changed since 2003.

School trips

The majority of parents/carers (87 per cent) said they had been asked to pay for a school trip in 2007, and in most cases (92 per cent) the child went on the trip.

The average cost of a day trip was £9.47 in primary schools and £21.70 in secondary schools. Residential trips in the UK were of a similar cost in primary and secondary schools (£153.14 and £160.07 respectively), while residential trips abroad cost £402.70 on average (figure for secondary schools only). Costs were similar to those recorded in 2003 (after adjusting for inflation).

Overall, 44 per cent of parents/carers were offered the opportunity to pay by instalments, and this was higher for residential trips (89 per cent).

¹ www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/atoz/u/uniform

Around two in three parents/carers (68 per cent) said that they had been asked to make a voluntary contribution towards a school trip that took place in school hours during 2007. Almost two fifths (38 per cent) were aware that no compulsory charge should be made for these trips².

The schools survey found that compulsory charges were imposed for one in ten curricular trips in primary schools and three in ten curricular trips in secondary schools, even though no compulsory charge should be made for these trips³.

Half of parents/carers said that they sometimes felt pressurised into paying for school trips.

Curriculum materials and stationery items

Parents/carers of secondary school children were more likely than those with primary school children to say they had to pay for various class materials. Overall, the average annual cost for music lesson materials was £102.65, and £65.90 for cookery materials. The annual cost of other class materials ranged from £10 to £33 on average. Annual costs were generally similar in 2007 and 2003 (after adjusting for inflation).

Parents/carers of primary school children did not generally have to provide as many stationery items as parents/carers of secondary school children. As a result, the average total spend on stationery items was lower for primary than secondary school children: £4.40 compared to £25.51.

Swimming lessons

Twelve per cent of parents/carers reported being asked to pay for swimming lessons in 2007, and most of these were parents/carers of primary school children. Amongst those that were asked to pay, the average total amount spent on swimming lessons in 2007 was £69.20. There was a small minority of schools (6 per cent of primary and 4 per cent of secondary schools) that made a compulsory charge for swimming lessons, while a higher proportion asked for voluntary contributions (28 per cent of

primary schools and 14 per cent of secondary schools). Amongst schools that did ask for a voluntary contribution, the average amount per lesson was £2.03 for primary schools and £1.72 for secondary schools.

School fund

Twenty nine per cent of parents/carers were asked to contribute to the school fund. (33 per cent of parents/carers of secondary school children and 27 per cent of parents/carers of primary school children).

Parents/carers were asked to contribute an average of around £35 a year. The average annual contribution requested by secondary schools was higher than the average requested from primary schools (£44 compared with £27). Parents/carers with higher incomes were more likely to be asked to contribute larger amounts compared with parents/carers on lower incomes; the average amount was £25 for parents/carers with incomes of less than £25,000 compared with £41 for parents/carers with incomes of £25,000 or more.⁴

Over a quarter (28 per cent) of schools said they asked parents/carers to contribute towards the school fund. All schools that asked for contributions said they were voluntary. The school fund was used most frequently as a means to support school trips; almost two thirds (64 per cent) of schools asking for contributions said this.

School lunch

Children in primary schools were more likely than their secondary school counterparts to take a packed lunch (63 per cent versus 52 per cent). Secondary schoolchildren were more likely to have had a school dinner (41 per cent compared with 35 per cent of primary schoolchildren).

The reason given most frequently by parents/carers as to why their child did not usually have a school meal was that their child preferred their usual lunch arrangement (55 per cent). However, a minority (6 per cent) said meals were not available at the school⁵.

⁴ Household income is based on the amount of annual income that the respondent said their household earned before tax is deducted. However, some caution needs to be taken as respondents may not have included tax credits.

⁵ N.B. Where the funding is delegated to them, schools must provide a lunch to any child eligible for Free School Meals

² Education Act 1996 (Sections 449-462), as amended by the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the Education Act 2002.

³ Ibid.

The average daily amount spent by parents/carers on meals during the school day was £1.86 (£1.97 when excluding parents/carers whose child was eligible for free school meals). Meals were generally more expensive for secondary school children compared with their primary school counterparts (the average daily cost was £2.09 for secondary schoolchildren and £1.69 for primary schoolchildren)

A third (32 per cent) of parents/carers whose child was eligible for free school meals said their child did not take up the free school meal. The main reason (given by 69 per cent of these parents/carers) was that the child preferred another lunch arrangement such as taking their own food or eating at home.

Travel

Children were most likely to travel to school by walking (48 per cent) or by car (32 per cent).

Children from low-income households (less than £15,000) were more likely than those from higher income households (£15,000+) to walk to school (55 per cent versus 44 per cent), and were less likely go by car (26 per cent versus 34 per cent).

Over half (53 per cent) of parents/carers whose child traveled to school by public transport, taxi or school bus said the local authority paid for this. In 2003, 26 per cent of parents/carers said local authorities paid.

Parents/carers who paid for their child to travel to school by public transport, school bus or taxi spent an average amount of £9.54 a week.

Other expenditure

School photographs

Two-thirds of parents/carers (67 per cent) had bought school photographs in 2007, and the average amount they spent was £18.86.

Schools were asked to give the cost of the basic package of school photographs, which was £10.77 for primary schools and £11.90 for secondary schools.

and to any other child if requested to do so, but there is no automatic requirement to provide a lunch.

Charity contributions

Nine in ten parents/carers (91 per cent) had been asked to contribute cash or items to charity on behalf of their child in 2007, and most of these had been asked on several occasions. The average contribution per event was £2.56. Schools held an average of just over three charity or non-uniform days each year. The average contribution requested for such events was £0.83 for primary schools and £1 for secondary schools.

Other activities

Three quarters of parents/carers (75 per cent) had been asked to contribute to other school activities such as cake stalls, raffles and jumble sales. The total spend on such items/activities in 2007 was £12.47 on average.

Attitudes towards costs of schooling

When asked how happy they were with all the costs associated with their child's schooling, 23 per cent of parents/carers were very happy, 60 per cent were quite happy, 13 per cent were not very happy and 3 per cent were not at all happy. Parents/carers of primary school children were generally happier with the costs, as were those with higher incomes, and those who had spent less in total.

Happiness with the cost of schooling has declined slightly over time. The proportion of parents and carers that were very or quite happy declined from 90 per cent in 2003 to 83 per cent in 2007; and the proportion who were not very or not at all happy increased from 9 per cent to 16 per cent.

Eight in ten parents/carers (79 per cent) were very or quite happy with the costs of uniform and PE kit, but 15 per cent were not very happy and 5 per cent were not at all happy. Parents/carers with lower incomes were generally less happy, as were those who had to buy uniform and PE kit from a designated outlet, rather than being able to buy it from anywhere.

Around seven in ten parents/carers (72 per cent) were very or quite happy with the costs of school trips, but 20 per cent were not very happy and 7 per cent were not at all happy. Again, parents/carers with lower incomes were generally less happy with the costs, as were those who had been asked to pay for more than two trips.

Ease of meeting the costs of schooling

Fourteen per cent of parents/carers said they found it very easy to meet costs, while 47 per cent found it quite easy. Nearly a third (32 per cent) found it quite difficult, while a significant minority (6 per cent) found it very difficult. Amongst families with incomes of £35,000 or more 20 per cent said it was difficult to meet costs, but this figure rose to two-thirds (65 per cent) of families with incomes of less than £15,000.

Ease of meeting the costs of schooling has declined slightly since 2003. The proportion of parents and carers that found it very or quite easy to meet costs declined from 72 per cent to 61 per cent; and the proportion who found it very or quite difficult increased from 27 per cent in 2003 to 38 per cent in 2007.

Financial help available

One in five parents/carers (20 per cent) said they were aware of financial assistance available from their child's school. In contrast to this three-quarters (76 per cent) of schools said financial assistance was available from the school fund. However, only a third of schools that offered this assistance said it was publicised, which may explain the discrepancy.

Awareness of assistance was lower amongst families with incomes of less than £15,000, although it is not possible to say whether this is due to lack of publicity or lack of assistance available in the schools their children attend.

Findings from the survey of children

The survey of children found that just over two thirds (68 per cent) said they always passed on letters from the school requesting payment from parents/carers, and a quarter said they passed on such letters most of the time.

Two thirds (65 per cent) of those who said they did not always pass on requests from the school for payments to parents/carers said they had forgotten, while a quarter said they had not wanted to go on the trip or take part in the activity. Children from lower income households were more likely than those with higher household incomes to say they did not pass on requests for money because they thought their parents/carers could not afford it (7 per cent where annual household income was less than

£15,000 compared with 1 per cent for those with an annual income of £15,000 or more).

Children were asked for their level of agreement with the statement 'Sometimes my parents/carers find it difficult to afford things that I need for school'. Seven in ten respondents (70 per cent) disagreed with this statement. However, children from households with an income of less than £15,000 a year were more likely to agree with the statement when compared with respondents from households earning £15,000 or more (42 per cent versus 21 per cent).

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR060) are available by phoning the DCSF Publications Orderline on 0845 60 222 60. Reports are priced at £4.95.

This research brief and the full report can also be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Jenny Buckland, 4th Floor, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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