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## **The myth of free education – back to school costs!**

*Red Network activist Barbara Smyth writes about the reality of back to school costs.*

Yes, it's that dreaded time of the year again for parents and guardians. It's time for those mental gymnastics of figuring out which bills you can put off in order to find the money to get started with buying the bag, all the books, the stationery, the uniform, the bus ticket and finally the so called 'voluntary' contribution. Now, multiply all those costs per child in families with multiple children and you quickly realise that free education is a cruel myth. In fact, many families go into debt and often to loan sharks who prey on them with extortionate interest rates!

A survey carried out by Barnardo's found that the cost of getting children back to school can cost anything from €320 for primary schools to a whopping €972 in secondary schools. Again, that's per child! My own experience of getting one of my children started in secondary schools looked like this, and that was in 2019!

iPad + books	€ 1,100
Uniform	€ 120
Bag	€ 40
Stationery	€ 40
Locker & Journal	€ 15
Bus	€ 300 (for 1 <sup>st</sup> of 4 terms in the academic year)
Voluntary contribution	€50

Total: €1615 + 3 more terms for the private bus (€900)

The cost of schoolbooks is a particular issue for parents. Just when they think they can pass down books from an older sibling, very frequently they are asked to buy a new edition of many books, meaning they cannot use the second-hand book that did perfectly fine for a sibling a year or two ahead.

Unfortunately, many parents go to Loan Sharks to get their children back to school. This is so awful but necessary for some families. Frequently rolling out new editions of books only serves to enhance the pocket of the author and the publisher and scam parents into spending even more money. Socialists would make education truly free, for all.

Book Rental Schemes are available in some primary schools at the moment. The government have announced that this scheme will be available to all primary schools from Autumn 2023. Autumn runs from August to October, so that does not necessarily mean the parents of children returning to some schools this

September can avail of the scheme. Again, another government promise for 2023 that may not really be deliverable until 2024.

School uniforms are another scam. For many parents, they can economise on parts of the uniform. However, the school jumper must be bought from a specific shop that is the exclusive supplier of the “official” jumper. These jumpers are over-priced and the durability to last more than a year is non-existent. Why can't students wear a less expensive jumper and parents either sew or iron on a crest? It is not rocket science!

Some parents can avail of free school transport provided by the state. However, if your child does not attend the closest school to your home, you do not qualify for the transport scheme. Parents are then faced with paying for a private bus. The cost for families is enormous. An average cost is €300 per term (as of now) per child, with a small deduction for a third child.

Parents and every worker in this country pay for our education system via taxation. For schools to ask for a voluntary contribution, which is not voluntary at all, is unfair. Parents should not be expected to bridge the gap so that schools can afford to put the heating system on. Parents regularly have to pay extras like, photocopying, grinds, past exam papers, trips and fees for study hours.

Every parent in the country has to pay specific fees for their child to sit the junior or leaving certificate. There are exemptions but only for some. These fees should not exist at all! For parents then to be asked to buy a book of past exam papers, in this age of technology, is crazy. These exam papers should be available online and free of charge. Again, it is another way for greedy publishers to make more money out of already hard-pressed families.

Only 20% of parents in Ireland are entitled to the Back-to-School clothing and footwear allowance that provides some relief to families. All parents of school going children should be entitled to this allowance.

For a government which claims to provide ‘Free Education’, they have a funny way of showing it. There is nothing free about our education system, do not believe the myths!

Now, add into the mix that your child may need an assessment of need. Parents will spend years lobbying whoever they can so that their child gets the assistance they need, often unsuccessfully.

Education shouldn't be the financial burden that it is. A government that values its young people would demonstrate that by properly funding public education. It is time parents demand action from this Fianna Fail and Fine Gael led government to do more and do better, much better!

Our teachers do an amazing job, they do not finish work at 3pm or 4pm, they take their work home too and spend hours correcting and grading out of hours. Our education system is anything but free. And of course, you're in serious trouble if your child accidentally breaks their school iPad as happened to me!!

**The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.**

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