

Background

Most schools in Ireland have a school uniform. A school uniform can play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining the school identity. It can contribute to setting an appropriate tone, instil pride, ensure pupils of all races and backgrounds feel welcome and protect children from external pressures to dress in a particular way. School uniform policy is decided by the Boards of Management in schools.

While there are significant merits to having a school uniform, there can be high costs associated with it. At this time of recession, more families are feeling the pressure of having to reduce their costs in line with decreases in household incomes and social welfare supports. Barnardos, National Parents Council Post Primary, National Parents Council Primary and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul continue to witness parents under significant strain when dealing with school costs, especially when there is more than one child in the family in the school system.

These organisations, supported by the wider educational bodies and stakeholders, urge all Boards of Management to review their current school uniform policy in light of the financial hardship that many parents face. We, collectively, are asking that Boards of Management use the following checklist when undertaking their review.

Reviewing School Uniform Policy – A Checklist

Ideally, uniforms should be practical, comfortable and represent value for money for families. No school wants a child to be disadvantaged in his/her education because of their family's financial situation. When reviewing school uniform policy, please consider the following:

Consultation:

- Consult with teaching staff to elicit their views and ideas for change and possible approaches.
- Consult widely with the parents of the school. This should include consulting with the Parent's Association (where one exists) but also with the wider parent population. This can be done in the normal ways for consulting with parents e.g. school consultation meeting, letter sent home seeking views, comment box on school website, survey etc. It would be important to keep records of the consultation process, including responses received and decisions taken.
- Consult widely with pupils, as appropriate, in the school using mechanisms such as student councils, direct open consultation, comment box, survey etc.
- Consider appropriateness of the uniform for those from minority ethnic backgrounds or different religious affiliations. It is therefore important to ensure, as much as is possible, that these voices are represented in the parent and pupil consultations.
- Consider the timeframe for introducing a new uniform policy or amending an existing one, should it be deemed necessary. A transitional period for phasing out the old uniform and introducing the new one helps to spread the costs and lessen pressure on families.

Types of Uniforms:

- Consider reducing the number of uniform items that require the school crest in order to minimise the costs involved.
- Consider choosing a plain coloured uniform and / or tracksuit which can be bought from high street retailers.
- Consider ordering school crests separately that can be either sewn or ironed on to generic uniforms. As prices for embroidered sow on badges depend on the digitized design for the

embroidery, the stitch count and the numbers of badges, costs can be reduced considerably by reviewing the crest.

- Consider how and where the uniforms are produced including the possibility that child labour might be involved in the production process.
- Consider how comfortable and practical the clothing is, especially for young children and make allowances for gender differences as appropriate.
- Consider whether particular items of clothing restrict mobility e.g. footwear, shirt and tie, and ensure the items are practical.

Cost of Uniforms

- Consider shopping around for a range of uniform providers ensuring competitive prices and quality and avoid using a single provider as this can be a barrier to competitive pricing.
- Consider the cost and availability of non-standard sizes.
- Consider the possibility of holding a 'Pre-Worn Uniform' sale or a 'Swap Rail' before summer holidays.
- Consider the cost of including branded items and items in unusual colours/ shades before requiring them to be worn and review the cost of these items on an ongoing basis.
- Consider the cost of maintaining the items e.g. dry cleaning costs etc.
- Consider the possibility of having a stock of communal blazers that the school can hire out to pupils for specific functions such school concerts, confirmation ceremonies etc. rather than requiring students to purchase them.

