

Parents' body demands an end to costly school jumper monopolies

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ten times the cost of a generic school pullover from Tesco or Aldi.

Hard-pressed parents are now complaining that, between books and uniforms, back-to-school time has become as expensive as Christmas.

The Department of Social Protection revealed this week that it had to pay out more than €40million to 160,000 families struggling to equip their children for school.

But the survey shows that the schools' insistence on only official uniforms is needlessly swallowing up a huge chunk of that taxpayer-funded support.

Parents of students at Salesian College in Celbridge have to pay an alarming €55 for a school jumper. With no alternative uniform shop within the town, the local St Vincent de Paul store has begun selling the jumpers.

Orla Kenny, whose son is in first year in the school, told the Mail that shopping for back to school was 'much worse than Christmas'.

She said: 'It is extremely tough and expensive and anyone who says it isn't, is mad. We still have to get rugby boots and other things, after already spending so much.'

'Even stuff like registration costs and extra curricular stuff... it's all very hard to manage - worse again if you've more than one child or twins.'

'The initial outlay is enormous. They have you over the barrel with it. But while I do think €55 is a lot of money, you will get three years

'It has to four times more durable'

minimum out of it. They are very good jumpers.'

Salesian College's principal, Brenda Kearns, refused to comment last night on why children in the school have to pay over €40 more than other schools and shops.

The average price for a small jumper, with crest, is €37.34. But with prices rising for larger fits, some parents are paying up to €59 for a basic crested jumper.

In Clonmel store Clintons, a Rockwell College jumper with crest can cost as much as €59 for the largest sizes. A spokesman said sizes went up to a 56in chest.

'Rockwell traditionally takes in a lot of international students, and you might get a few German students who are huge. And I'd hate to be short if they were stuck,' the spokesman said.

In Cork, though, 4orm sells Scoil Mhuire jumpers from €18.50, while Cappataggle National School students in Co. Galway can buy their jumpers for €14.95.

A spokesman for 4orm said: 'Uniform wear has to be four times more durable than leisure wear as a general rule if it wants to be certified.'

'There are three brands, and it does vary and a lot of it is down to the discretion and specifications of



Disappointing: Dermott Jewell

the school. From my experience, the most expensive I have seen would be less than €50. That's for the brand selling from Ireland - they can't compete with China.'

A Barnardos survey earlier in the year found the average back-to-school costs were as high as €735 for secondary school students and €380 for primary school students.

The costs have heaped the pressure on charities such as St Vincent de Paul, where shops have been forced to begin supplying jumpers to deal with the demand.

The charity told the Mail last night: 'A number of St Vincent de Paul shops have to sell school uniforms. SVP has consistently looked for school boards to reduce the back

to school costs as the pressure for parents at this time of the year is very intense.'

'They all wouldn't be selling school uniforms, but in an area where there isn't a shop perhaps they may then decide to. Our stores base their decisions on what's happening in the locality. They see a need and they then fill it. But the central issue here is for school boards to address it.'

Dermott Jewell, chief executive of the Consumers' Association of Ireland, says that it's time for parents to take a stance.

'It's particularly disappointing because with so much attention brought to this last year, and so many utterances of the major concerns of parents, nothing has been

'Disappointment turns to anger'

done,' he said.

'It's then that the disappointment turns to anger.'

'All I can suggest is for parents to come together as a group and to try to impress upon the school that; A, it is unacceptable and B, to ask why it is that they have no consideration for them whatsoever.'

'Most households and parents do a lot to help the schools out during the year, so it should be the least to expect to get some consideration in return.'

National Parents Council president Don Myers said parents and schools needed to co-operate.

'We have campaigned last year, the

year before and earlier this year with regard to the cost of uniforms,

'We want it to be opened up, as a lot of the schools now have closed it down to one or two suppliers. Schools need to be more aware of the costs.'

'Some schools have some ridiculous prices and there needs to be more communication with the parents.'

Meanwhile Education Minister Jan O'Sullivan defended the Government's decision to deny 4,000 claims for the back-to-school allowance, with a number of such cases falling just €5 over the threshold.

'That is policy across Government, because it is actually administered by the Department of Social Protection. But, it is another one of those areas where, we are in a debate around should we have lower taxes and should we have increased spending,' she said.

'I think we need to get that balance right. I want to make sure that we start to have money for these kinds of absolutely crucial issues - such as, affordability for school and, indeed, classroom size.'

'It is not within my ministerial responsibility but these programmes need to be in constant review.'

Plain boy's V-neck jumpers are available in Tesco for as little as €3.75.

In July, Aldi was advertising uniforms for less than €6.50 - €1.99 for a pair of trousers in a variety of colours, plain blue or white polo shirts at €1.99 for two and a round neck sweater for €2.49 in navy or red.

Girls' pleated skirts were advertised for just €1.99.

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HOW DOES YOUR



SCHOOL

- St Mary's Academy CBS
- St Leo's College
- Carlow Vocational School
- St Finian's College
- Mount Sackville
- St Wolstan's
- Roscommon CBS
- St Michaels Loreto Secondary School
- Abbey Community School
- St Pauls Community School
- Castleknock College
- Gormanston
- Coláiste Éamonn Rís
- Heywood Community School
- Presentation College
- St Mary's Secondary School
- Arklow Community College
- Ballinamore Post Primary School
- Ballinamore Community School
- Kilrush Community School
- Salesian College
- Enniscorthy Vocational School
- Loreto Secondary School
- Moate Community School
- Scoil Mhuire
- Presentation College
- Killarney Community College
- St Attracta's Community School
- Jesus & Mary Secondary School
- Loreto St Stephen's Green
- Mount Anville
- Largy College
- Inver College
- Crescent College Comprehensive
- Abbey CBS
- Coláiste Cholmcille
- St Mary's College (The Marist)
- Mercy Secondary School
- Ardcoil Phádraig
- Gonzaga College
- Rice College
- Cappataggle National School
- Athlone Community College
- Garbally College
- St Mary's Secondary School
- King's Hospital
- Larkin Community College
- Loreto Crumlin
- Oatlands College
- O'Connells

Relief for 7,000 schoolchildren as schools keep taking the tablets

MORE than 7,000 students now use 'digital' schoolbags, lifting a heavy weight off the shoulders of children.

Luttrellstown Community College in Dublin yesterday became the 100th school to sign up to a programme that replaces bulging schoolbags with tablets.

The 140 first-year students at the Clonsilla school will use mobile devices and digital books in place of traditional textbooks.

Meanwhile, Loreto Sec-

By Eamon Donoghue

ondary School in Kilkenny has completed its three-year digital scheme. Principal Colm Keher told the Mail that all 'first, second and third year students are now using tablets'.

He said: 'First years are doing 13 subjects, and if you were to stack 13 textbook on a table you'd see how bulky and big a load that is.'

He said a schoolbag can weigh as much as 15kg, add-

ing: 'The recommended weight to carry is 10 to 15 per cent of your body weight, and this is a lot more.'

The Loreto principal said that it costs parents €650 to go digital but over 50 per cent of this is for ebooks.

Earlier this year the Irish Educational Publisher's Association said the average spend on schoolbooks was €400, without the cost of additional copy books, novels or any other supplementary resources.



Gone digital: At Luttrellstown college yesterday