



Spotlight on the True Cost of Going to School

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‘Children and young people consistently raise the impact that cost of living pressures and financial stress has on their lives. It is time to examine the true costs of going to school and identify ways to make public education more affordable.’

Helen Connolly, Commissioner for Children and Young People

As South Australia’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, a key focus of my work, is raising awareness about systemic issues that impact on children and young people’s rights, development, and wellbeing outcomes.

My advocacy is directly informed by my regular conversations with children and young people. It seeks to place their voices front and centre in public policy and ensure they are engaged, healthy, safe, valued, and have a positive view of their future.

Children and young people have consistently raised with me concerns about what they consider to be the high costs of going to school. It is something that is never far from their minds. In fact they readily talk about the impact that cost-of-living pressures and financial stress has on their parent’s lives, their own lives, and on the lives of other young people they know.

The high costs they're referring to are an issue for children in public schools and include the costs of uniforms, digital devices, textbooks, transport, stationery, and other materials, as well as the costs associated with their participation in school camps, excursions, sports, and other extra curricula activities.

From what children and young people have told me, these cumulative costs are significant, with many of them talking about feeling 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed' when their families cannot afford them. Beyond the impact this has on their learning, this can have a significant impact on their participation and connection with their school and surrounding community. It can also impact on their friendships, their sense of self-worth and belonging, as well as on how they are treated by their peers, their peers' parents, and their teachers.

Context

In South Australia, over 200,000 adults and children struggle to survive on income payments that are well below the poverty line, that's 1 in 8 people living in SA – including over 75,000 children (nearly 1 in 4) who are growing up in the poorest families.¹ Children living in poverty are more likely to attend school less frequently and have difficulties learning at home, experience deprivation in terms of their relationship with friends, and have less involvement in extracurricular activities like sport, music and art. Growing up poor means that as children get older they are more likely than those who grew up in never-poor households to leave school early and have difficulty transitioning from education to the world of work. They are also more likely to find it difficult to engage with formal post school education, ultimately affecting their socioeconomic status in adulthood causing adult poverty.²

In 2019, I released my *Leave No One Behind* report, which was the culmination of many conversations about how children experience poverty in their everyday lives.

At this time, I reported that many children had identified the cost of education as a significant issue in their families, which was impacting on attendance and participation. One of the recommendations in this report was for the Department for Education to work with SACOSS to audit the cumulative costs of public education on low-income families. A further recommendation related to free public transport for children on School Cards to and from school and to attend sport. These recommendations have not been progressed. In 2020, I released *The Blame Game* – a report on the perspectives of children and young people on the impact



of school exclusions. In this report financial insecurity was identified as a contributing factor in children's experiences of school exclusion. The cost of uniforms and school ancillary costs were reasons for non-attendance, either as a preventive measure to avoid being singled out and identified as being poor, or as a reason they identified as being behind their school suspension.

In 2021, I released two further reports – *Menstruation Matters* and *My Digital Life*. These reports highlight two significant cost-related barriers to education; namely a lack of period products or 'period poverty', and a lack of digital devices and data referred to as 'digital poverty'. Some progress has been made in relation to the recommendations about the provision of free period products in schools, and device and data access for children in low-income families.

This Spotlight Report builds on this suite of work, and identifies the multiple challenges children in low-income families face in relation to their education. Through a focus on the true cost of public education in South Australia, this spotlight continues to highlight the ongoing cost of education issues raised by children and young people, including those concerns raised in the postcards initiative that asks primary school aged children what they would change about their lives if they could.

“ I would provide parents with money to pay for their house and their children's school fees.” – 11 year old

“ I would give poor family's children free school for a month and when they have to pay I'd make it half price.” – 9 year old

“ make education free to make all families able to have education!” – 11 year old

Previous recommendations for critical anti-poverty responses are again made in this report as they continue to be unimplemented and relevant. These recommendations pertain to a number of government departments. However, the Department for Education is ideally placed to take the lead in this area. By working with public school communities they have the capacity to look closely at how the cumulative costs of going to school can be reduced for those families known to be experiencing financial hardship, and whose children's attendance, participation and wellbeing are being compromised as a result.

Through this sample of 108 government schools from across metropolitan and regional South Australia, we have started the process to identify the significant and ongoing costs, including, but not limited to, those considered 'essential', which are, in reality, the 'bare minimum' costs.

This report emphasises the need for greater understanding and for a response at a school and system level that addresses the financial barriers to public education that exist. In doing so, it highlights the need to support the participation, education and wellbeing of all children, young people, and their families, regardless of their circumstances and geographical location.

Calculating the true costs

To better understand the true cost of education in 2021, I undertook desktop research on the type of costs children were concerned about. This included reviewing publicly available information about school fees, as well as other items or services such as excursions, uniforms, or canteen items listed on school websites.

Of the 108 government schools across the state whose publicly available costs were reviewable, there were 67 primary schools, 22 secondary schools, 9 combined primary and secondary schools, 7 area schools, and 3 special education schools. This sample grouping reflects a similar proportion of school types and locations to South Australia's total 524 government schools.

The sample schools also represented all 12 government regions of the state, with just over half (57%) located in metropolitan Adelaide, and the remaining (43%) located in regional parts of South Australia.

Sample schools also reflected a range of socio-economic profiles, based on their category of Index of Educational Disadvantage, with the most disadvantaged schools having an index of 1 and the least disadvantaged an index of 7.

In addition to reflecting the diversity of South Australian government schools, in terms of geography, socioeconomic status, and school types, schools were also selected based on whether they have publicly accessible information about school fees and other charges available on their website.

Emerging from this research is a fuller picture of the true cost of public education. It examines the cost of uniforms as well as the cost of full participation and belonging, including other 'hidden' or 'incidental' costs. While the costs of some events and activities are officially considered 'optional' or 'non-essential', from the perspective of children and young people and their families, they are all essential insofar as they allow for full and enriching participation in all aspects of school life; a right consistent with Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The findings reported here are consistent with the Futurity Investment Group Planning for Education Index, which estimates the total annual cost of education at government, Catholic and Independent schools in cities and regions across Australia.³ The findings are also consistent with school-level financial data available on the My School website, which outlines school net recurrent income and net recurrent income per student, including 'fees, charges, and parent contributions'.





Rights to Education

Education is not only a fundamental children's right in itself, it is also key to realising other human rights that include social and emotional development, and economic participation of active and informed citizens. Universal access to education is also recognised for its potential to reduce inequality and poverty.

Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) set out the right of every child to an education that develops their personality and talents, as well as their mental and physical abilities to the full. Article 28 also states that primary education should be free to all.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration sets out Australia's goals for education at a national level. It establishes that education must prepare young people for active citizenship and meaningful engagement with the labour market. Education systems must also prepare young people for lifelong learning and promote equity as well as excellence in education outcomes.

South Australia's Public Education Statement highlights equity as an important foundation of free and universal education, acknowledging that educational outcomes should **not** be linked to parental wealth, social status, or influence.

Education is compulsory in South Australia. At the same time, the government recognises that compulsion is impractical without making school available and accessible in every community free 'of tuition costs'. But, although free of tuition costs, public education is not free. In fact, school fees make up only a relatively small portion of the overall cost of education at a government school, and the cost increases as students get older. This can be particularly onerous for low-income families and for those with more than one child at school. Uniforms, excursions, technology, sport and participation in fun events are examples of costs often labelled as 'optional extras'. Not only do these add up, but more importantly they are key to a student's capacity to have a full and enriching educational experience. Add to this the reality that many schools are increasingly relying on families to raise funds, or pay out of their own pockets for enhanced school facilities and initiatives, and the financial and social pressure on families already struggling becomes immense.

While the School Card Scheme provides crucial support to a significant number of families, it only covers 'essential items and services' as itemised in the materials and services charge. It does not include uniforms, computers and extra-curricular activities. Further, there may be families whose income is just above the eligibility threshold for the School Card Scheme who miss out on this vital support.



Recommendations

1

Make information relating to the true cost of going to public schools available itemising the full range of “optional charges” that could apply.

2

Provide free laptop and data packs to all SA School Card holders as required.

3

Expand access to free public Wi-Fi to include all public buildings, public transport, and community infrastructure such as libraries and school grounds.

4

Provide access to free period products at schools, community centres, youth facilities, libraries, and chemists.

5

Provide free transport to and from school for children whose families are eligible for a School Card.

6

Provide free school breakfast and lunch programs in priority high need schools.

7

Provide free school uniforms and sports kits to all School Card holders as required.



Missing Out

Education is more than simply sitting in a classroom with the ‘essential’ or core items and materials at your fingertips. It’s about having the full range of opportunities and experiences that make up a ‘school life’ available to you; from connecting with peers and trusted adults, to practical learning experiences that can act as a bridge to the community. From work and career ideas to experiences that foster aspiration and lead to real life opportunities. The social, emotional, and academic aspects of school can be powerful in shaping a young person’s skills, sense of self, outlook on life, and hopes and dreams for the future.

The true cost of education therefore covers more than the ‘essentials’ and it includes the many incidental costs associated with participation in education ranging from ‘access’ costs such as transport and childcare, to ‘bare minimum’ costs such as school fees. It includes ‘ongoing’ costs such as school uniforms, stationary and school snacks and lunches, as well as those ‘extra’ costs associated with attending school events, excursions, and school sports.

These costs also impact on the level of extra curricula activities school children and young people can afford to participate in outside of school, such as club sport, music, dance or drama lessons to name a few.

Reducing the cost of education in South Australia is about reducing exclusion and stigma and maximising every child’s participation and sense of belonging at school and beyond.

These seemingly ‘non-essential’ costs can be all the difference between an enriching and engaging school experience and one that is isolating and dull.

As Victoria University’s Mitchell Institute report into educational opportunity in Australia shows, young people from poorer families, those living in regional and remote parts of the country, and Aboriginal people, are left behind across all domains from the early years into adulthood.⁴

The report authors noted that this means Australia is falling short on the national goals for education, particularly on the ambition to deliver on both excellence and equity.

According to Futurity Investment Group’s Planning for Education Index, schooling in South Australia is one of the lowest compared to the rest of the nation.⁵ However, average incomes in SA are also one of the lowest in Australia.⁶

We know that more than 1 in 6 South Australian children are on the most excluded quartile of the Child Social Exclusion Index, and that in some areas of the state more than 50% of children and young people are living in poverty.⁷ These figures hide the day-to-day reality and stresses associated with financial pressures and poverty, including those experienced in a school environment.

As children and young people progress through school, they are navigating a complex stage of life characterised by significant physical, social, and emotional changes. They want to both 'fit in' and to 'stand out'. Wherever children and young people live, their financial situation can shape their experiences and opportunities and is too often a predictor of their 'success' at school and beyond.

“ the cycle of poverty is self-perpetuating in the sense that individuals born into families of a lower socio-economic status are far more likely to become disenfranchised with the education system, and therefore much more likely to miss school and miss opportunities that will give them a leg-up in the job market.” – 17 year old

No matter where children go to school, having the 'latest' or 'coolest' item, regardless of how expensive, is often an important part of belonging and friendships. When everyone else seems to be affording all the latest shoes or digital devices and going on all the school trips or attending several after school activities, children and young people who can't afford these things are aware of what they are missing out. This 'missing out' leads to feelings of isolation from their peers. Whether they exclude themselves or are actively excluded, it can be difficult to participate in conversations about opportunities and activities they know they won't be participating in.

Financial issues have been identified by young people as a reason for both informal and formal suspensions or exclusions from school. Young people reported difficulties paying for uniforms, transport, food, and other basic items necessary for school life. Whether directly or indirectly, poverty contributed to their exclusion from key opportunities to learn, be active and socialise, or attend school sports, camps, or excursions.

“ Couldn't afford PE uniform ... by not having the right uniform I would be excluded and get into trouble.” – 16 year old

“ It feels like schools punish you for being poor – having to stay in class during school breaks so you can use the school's technology to get your work done, feels like a punishment rather than a support.” – 15 year old

“ make sure that prices are lowered and so people can afford more items. I would make sure that the people who don't have a home can be built a home. I want to make sure that children don't drop out of school to work because their families cannot afford it.” – 13 year old

Government Assistance Available

In 2020, the Department for Education provided School Card assistance to approximately 57,000 government school students; compared with the 57,803 students who were provided School Card assistance in 2019.⁸ Based on enrolment figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, this equates to almost 1 in 3 (32.7%) South Australian government school students receiving School Card assistance.⁹

The fact that there are this many students receiving this assistance, and whose family income makes them eligible, points to the need for more awareness and action to address the barriers to educational inclusion that children and young people and their families are facing.

Whilst government schools are free of tuition costs, schools do apply a materials and services charge to each student, which is set by the governing council of each school. This charge 'must reflect the actual cost of the essential items and services an individual student uses or consumes during the course of their study'.¹⁰ Where there are additional costs to undertake specific subjects, the school can also set a charge for individual subjects.

The materials and services charge can either be:

- The 'prescribed amount' of \$246 for primary schools and \$325 for secondary schools; or
- A charge greater than this prescribed amount.¹¹

The School Card Scheme provides financial assistance to families unable to cover the materials and services charge, with eligibility based on family income and approved on an application basis. International students are not eligible. Children in care under formal or informal arrangements do need to apply, but children in care under the Guardianship of the Minister are automatically approved for School Card assistance. Families with multiple children can apply for all children in one single application, but as the School Card does not automatically roll over annually, families must reapply each year.

The School Card rate provided to families is currently set at the same amount as those prescribed earlier. If the School Card rate does not cover the whole materials and services charge, any remaining difference is not enforceable. However, governing councils can ask families to pay this difference as a 'voluntary contribution' if they are informed that payment is voluntary and not legally binding. If the School Card rate is more than the materials and services charge, any remaining amount can be applied to other student costs, such as excursions or events.

Other targeted assistance includes Centrelink allowances for geographically isolated children for travel, boarding and other education expenses who board away from home to attend secondary school. To help with the cost of their child's secondary schooling, ABSTUDY School Term Allowance, School Fees Allowance and Fares Allowance is also available for eligible Aboriginal families.

The *Education and Children's Services Act 2019* states that a child cannot be refused materials or services even if their materials and services charge has not been paid (s129(3)). The Act also allows schools to waive the materials and services charge in individual cases based on 'hardship' and can instead provide the student with 'essential' materials free of charge (s83 of the Education and Children's Services Regulations 2020).

The materials and services charge is lower in disadvantaged schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged schools found in rural and regional areas of the state.

Although the average materials and services charge is lower in regional and disadvantaged schools, this charge does not cover the costs of any 'items and services that are not essential to the curriculum and are therefore optional for the student to participate in'.¹²

From the available data, there appears to be a lack of consistent application about what are 'essential' and what are 'optional' or 'non-essential' items. In some cases, it is left up to individual schools to determine which category items fall into.

Regardless, the following are deemed as 'non-essential' items. As such, they are instead deemed 'optional charges' and are not covered by the materials and services charge:

- camps, excursions, performances, incursions, and swimming 'if not essential to the curriculum'
- photocopy services
- uniforms and school bag
- sports clothing
- graduation t-shirt or sweater
- school photographs
- formals and discos
- sporting activities outside core curriculum requirements
- Vocational and Educational Training (VET) where a registered training organisation (RTO) determines course requirements; and
- laptop computer hire 'where the laptop is not required for the student to undertake their curriculum'.

Many of these 'non-essential' costs are in fact essential to children and young people's participation, belonging, and learning at school and beyond, with some students being disadvantaged as a result. They will either not receive the item, or will miss out on the opportunity to participate in the activity until their family provides payments, or makes a commitment to pay.¹³

Some of these costs are more visible than others. But regardless of how visible they are, they can be significant for some families, regardless of where their children live, or go to school. For families with lower incomes or multiple children attending school, these cumulative 'non-essential' costs are likely to be the most significant; sometimes far more than the materials and services charges, particularly when there are multiple children from one family involved.



School Uniform Costs

Although school uniforms are intended to promote equity by ensuring all students are ‘dressed the same’, uniforms remain the main indicator of income in a school environment. Children and young people report that not being able to afford uniform items can be a reason for being bullied and socially excluded, affecting a child’s confidence and sense of belonging at school.

“ No one listens to me when I need shoes to look the same. Bullied. My shoes got taken. No replacement.” – 18 year old

While expectations about school uniforms vary in schools across the state, it is typically expected that families will ensure their child or children have appropriate clothing, shoes, school bag, and sports uniform. This includes uniform items suitable to both winter and summer weather conditions. Rather than being a ‘one off’ cost, school uniforms are an ongoing cost, with most items needing replacement several times a year. The financial impact this has on families with multiple children is significant.

“ A lot of young people can’t even afford the things they need (healthy food, clean water, school uniforms, school supplies).”
– 16 year old

According to Departmental Policy, schools must keep uniform costs ‘as low as practical for families’ through the provision of loans and subsidies, bulk-buying, or by offering second-hand or exchange services.

Although schools should not require parents to buy items from a particular supplier, any non-logo item is required to be imprinted with the school logo.

At the same time, however, guidance from the Department also allows a range of disciplinary action to be applied where students breach the school uniform dress code. This includes applying ‘exclusion zones’ and limiting ‘school yard or oval access at break times’, or ‘prohibiting students from going on school excursions’. In some cases, students are given detention or ‘extra duties’ because they have failed to comply with school uniform rules. This is counter to s39(6) of the Education and Children’s Services Regulations, which states school principals may not use exclusionary practices to enforce school dress codes.

Beyond the costs of actual uniform items, family income also affects whether a child or young person can afford regular laundry costs, and other hygiene and personal care products. This becomes particularly important during puberty for young people who menstruate need reliable access to period products, and given all young people are expected to use deodorant and to remove or groom head, body and facial hair.

Of the sample schools with the materials and services charge listed on their website, half also had a uniform list available (30 primary schools, 14 high schools and 9 combined schools).

There was both variation in the number of items listed and the price ranges for these items.

Typically, public high schools had the highest number of items on their uniform list (an average of 21 items), followed by combined schools (19 items), primary schools (17 items) and area schools (10 items).

Across both primary and secondary levels, metropolitan high schools had higher numbers of uniform items listed than did regional schools. There was an average of 18 items listed at a metropolitan primary school compared to 12 at a regional primary school. At the secondary level there was an average of 24 items listed for metropolitan high schools compared to 14 for regional high schools.

School type and location	Average number of uniform items	Average cost of uniform items
Primary school in metropolitan Adelaide	18 items	\$27
Primary school in regional South Australia	12 items	\$22
Secondary school in metropolitan Adelaide	24 items	\$41
Secondary school in regional South Australia	14 items	\$40

Similarly, across school types, lower index schools (more disadvantaged schools) generally had fewer items on their uniform lists, with an average of 10 to 15 items at Category 2, 3 and 4 schools, compared to 18 to 23 items at Category 5, 6 and 7 schools.

Having fewer items available for purchase, or expected to be purchased, is likely to translate into lower costs overall for families. As is also the case with the materials and services charges, the average costs of school uniform items appears to be lower, and therefore more affordable, in lower socioeconomic and regional areas, and in primary schools when compared to high schools. However, regardless of where students live, the ongoing costs associated with purchasing, washing, and replacing uniform items to meet school dress codes are significant.

Across all school types and locations, the average cost of one uniform item was \$32. On average, uniform items are more expensive in metropolitan schools than in regional schools (\$33 compared to \$29) and in secondary schools than in primary schools (\$41 compared to \$25).



Breaking costs down further by school type and location shows that the cost of an average uniform item at a metropolitan primary school is \$27, compared to \$22 at a regional primary school. At a metropolitan high school the average cost of an average uniform item is \$41, compared to \$40 at a regional high school.

The average cost of uniform items at combined schools was \$43; higher than the average high school cost (\$41) and the overall average cost (\$32). All of the combined primary/secondary schools used in the sample were located in metropolitan Adelaide.

It is also worth noting that given the fact uniforms are worn every day of the school week,

it is common for families to buy more than one of the same items, doubling or tripling the cost of individual items in some cases. Most schools also offer 'special' items such as hoodies or jumpers for students in their final year of both primary and secondary school which no child will want to be without.

For some families, the cost of uniforms, alongside equipment, membership, and transport costs, make participation in sports, and other structured activities, at school and outside of school simply impossible.

The price ranges and average costs of the lowest to highest cost items across different school types and locations are shown in the table below.

School type and location	Price range for highest cost item	Average cost of highest cost item	Examples of highest cost items
Primary school in metropolitan Adelaide	\$20–\$77	\$56	Backpack (\$32–\$55) Summer dress (\$50) Jackets, hoodies and shirts (\$35–\$55) Rugby tops (\$64) Winter skirt (\$59–\$77)
Primary school in regional South Australia	\$30–\$55	\$45	Rugby top (\$30) Hoodie, dress (\$40–\$50) Winter skirt (\$55)
Secondary school in metropolitan Adelaide	\$62–\$229	\$126	Rugby top (\$62) Summer dress, winter skirt (\$80–\$88) Winter skirt (\$92) Blazer (\$198–\$229)
Secondary school in regional South Australia	\$60–\$86	\$75	Jumper (\$60) Spray jacket (\$76) Rugby top (\$75) Dress (\$80)

The Hidden Costs of Belonging

Many of the fun events and initiatives that regularly take place in schools beyond ‘core curriculum activities’ have associated costs. These can include dress-up days and casual days, cake sales and other fundraising events, festivals, discos, Book Week, school musicals and drama productions to name a few. These enriching participation opportunities are key to children and young people’s sense of belonging, friendship, and learning, while they’re at school.

Seemingly small on their own, ‘hidden’ or ‘incidental’ costs associated with such additional activities do accumulate. Although they’re not intended to be exclusive to students who can afford them, these costs can place extra financial pressure on many families. They can also unintentionally isolate students who are unable to participate due to cost barriers, and can also lead students to stay home from school on certain days to avoid any embarrassment.

“ Not having enough money can prevent you from participating in the things you want to do outside of school.” – 15 year old

SCHOOL EXCURSIONS AND EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

Although the materials and services charge covers excursions or camps deemed ‘essential to the curriculum’, most schools also organise extra excursions throughout the year. Parents are liable for the cost of these as well as the ‘hidden’ costs associated with them, including any entry fees, lunch money, ‘spending money’ and costs associated with purchasing or hiring any equipment required.

At secondary school level, there are interstate, or in some cases international exchange opportunities that also need to be factored in.

Missing out on these excursions and trips can mean missing out on learning opportunities, cultural experiences, and inspiration for future careers. They may also create tension between those students (and their parents and peers) who can and cannot afford to take up such opportunities.

FORMALS AND GRADUATIONS

Similarly, major milestone events such as formals and graduation events are often seen as rites of passage by students, their parents and their school. But the cost of tickets and outfits for these events can be especially prohibitive. Young women in particular face considerable pressure to have their hair, makeup, and nails done for these special occasions, adding to the already significant costs of purchasing a suitable outfit, including shoes and other accessories. Community-based initiatives have been established for the sole purpose of providing donated formal dresses, suits and other formalwear for loan or hire by students who cannot afford to buy such items new.

MENTOS

Formal ‘mementos’ of school years and events, such as school photos and school yearbooks, also present further costs for families. As well as missing out on events and activities ‘on the day’ students whose families cannot afford these school mementos miss out on the shared memories and photographs that these items provide.

STATIONERY AND PRINTING

Certain stationery items that are considered 'essential to the curriculum offered' are covered in the materials and services charge. However, other stationery items and resources that a student might be expected to have create additional costs. The Officeworks 'Shop by grade' pricelists range from \$50 for students in year levels 1 to 6, to \$120 for students in years 7 to 9 and \$285 for senior secondary students in years 10 to 12 – a figure which can go up to \$500 if students require an electronic calculator.

DIGITAL DEVICES AND ACCESS

Being able to afford 'printing money' (money for printing) at school, and having access to the Internet, a printer and ink at home, as well as access to personal digital devices and software that students are expected to teach themselves, is widely considered to be a 'basic requirement' for school, central to a child or young person's capacity to participate in their education.

Some schools provide guidelines for devices, while others provide a list of recommended devices for parents to choose from. The cost of mobile phone and laptop devices range from one hundred dollars to over \$2000. There are also the extra costs associated with accessories, storage, insurance and data or Wi-Fi connections to the Internet. While an average household internet plan costs approximately \$71 per month, the cheapest plans cost approximately \$29 per month, with some providers offering low-income internet plans to families on specific government assistance at \$10 per month.

Costs have become greater during the Covid-19 pandemic, as learning has moved online during lockdowns, further highlighting the issue of digital poverty, inequality and exclusion. For children and young people who only have a mobile device, or whose access to a device is shared with other

family members, it is particularly difficult to meet the growing expectations of some peers, teachers, and school principals.

Without adequate access to Wi-Fi and data, young people report that it is nearly impossible to complete their homework, or fully participate in shared projects, communicate with teachers and peers via email, let alone do any compulsory operating system updates. Time spent resolving issues of access is time taken away from learning and engaging in education, leaving some children and young people well behind their peers.

During the COVID lockdowns, the Department for Education recognised the issue of the digital divide for many children and provided devices and SIM cards with internet connectivity to students in need. However, these were required to be returned after the lockdown.

TRANSPORT

Affordable and accessible transport is key to children and young people's ability to attend school, as well as attain and maintain a part-time job, or attend social, cultural, or sporting events. Some students might need to travel between school campuses, or from school to their TAFE or VET provider.

The state government's fare allowance provides transport support for children living five kilometres or more from the nearest public school or school bus, while Adelaide Metro offers concession rates for students travelling on public transport with valid student IDs. For families on low incomes or with multiple children, and for those living in regional or remote communities (including those students whose parents do not have a car) the cost of transport, combined with inadequate public transport options, can be a significant barrier to full participation in their education.

For some isolated and Aboriginal students, although assistance may be available the majority of students are deemed ineligible.

SPORT AND OTHER RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Costs associated with extra-curricula activities such as sport or music lessons, can also be a significant barrier to participation. Costs range from membership and registration fees to those associated with purchase of specific uniforms, shoes, musical instruments, and other 'essential' equipment. These interests are not only linked to children and young people's wellbeing and relationships in the present, but also to their hopes and dreams for the future.

All primary school children can receive up to a \$100 discount per calendar year on sports or dance membership and registration fees, or on the cost of a learn to swim program.

From 2022, the Sports Voucher program will expand to include students in years 8 and 9. While this initiative eases part of the financial burden for a season or semester, there are costs beyond the voucher that are not covered, particularly for students who want to play more than one sport or activity. And depending on which region of the state a child is located, discrepancies in fees and costs exist. For example, the costs of Little Athletics varies between \$40 and \$165 per child depending on location. Further, once families are involved, additional financial and social pressure to contribute to sporting clubs' fundraising efforts may also be expected.

- “ Poorer kids should have a try at things so they are included. They can't do a lot for free.” – 13 year old
- “ Prices of housing, education etc. continue to increase. Government funding is not sufficient enough to support individuals living in poverty.” – 15 year old



Many children and young people have raised what they see as significant inequity when government assistance is provided for formal sports but not for other outdoor and/or physically active pursuits such as Scouts, Guides, and other recreational pursuits.

“ I love sport but its not for everyone so you need to support non mainstream activities such as Scouting climbing chess clubs etc...you need to help the youth find their tribe if that's sport great but if its not don't abandon them”
– 17 year old male

Children and young people with a lived experience of poverty spoke about how their family becomes entirely focused on ‘the necessities’ so that ‘fun’ or ‘additional’ activities are luxuries generally not available to them.

SCHOOL LUNCHES

Although food is a necessity and some schools in South Australia already offer breakfast programs, it can be difficult to find cheap lunch options when cost is a barrier. School canteen prices range from 50 cents to 6 dollars per item, while packed lunches require time and energy to prepare. Young people recognise that healthy food is ‘just as important as having food at all’, but sometimes healthy choices aren’t available to families on low incomes.

This not only has a long-term impact on health and well-being, but in the short term affects students’ capacity to participate and concentrate in class.

Stigma, inequality, and financial pressure can be compounded in some school environments, particularly when rewards may be offered to children who have ‘healthy lunchboxes’.

Although several teachers and schools offer emergency lunch options there are few structured lunch programs available.

According to the School Meal Provision Rapid Evidence Review, 2020, the University of Sydney¹⁴ found that free or reduced-price school meal programs increased student participation and had a role in protecting vulnerable children from food insecurity. It also found that while targeted programs can result in stigmatisation for vulnerable students, universal free meal programs reduced the risk of stigma and increased overall student participation in meals.



A Way Forward

School affordability is a major issue, particularly for low-income families and those with multiple children. Given the frequency with which this issue is being reported, it is time for the South Australian government, along with public schools to account for the true cost of education per student. It is also time to enable every child's full participation in school life by providing more comprehensive financial assistance to those low-income families who need it.

The costs of individual items or events may seem insignificant on their own, but the day-to-day reality of these costs, along with the cumulative impact of having to miss out when they cannot be afforded, is significant. Families should not be in a position where they must choose between ensuring their child has enough food or the 'right' uniform or equipment and transport for a sporting activity.

Although many schools offer a range of support strategies to help families in need cover costs (via short term loans, subsidies, payment plans, etc.) these are often left up to the discretion of the school leadership and governing councils to be applied on an individual family basis. Apart from the work involved, this approach also has potential to create stigma and embarrassment for those who need to access such arrangements. Despite this important support, children living in poverty frequently report facing many obstacles to their participation, which in turn affects their feelings of belonging.

In a school environment, some markers of poverty are more visible than others. Regardless of how visible, the short-term and long-term social, economic, emotional, and educational impacts of missing out are, they don't only affect educational engagement

and achievement, but also relationships, health, and aspirations.

So that SA's education system is not unknowingly exacerbating exclusion, isolation, and disengagement, government schools need to be aware and able to respond appropriately to the impact of poverty on their students. There is currently significant variation across how public schools do this, which suggests policy responses should not be left solely to individual schools.

As such, there should be mechanisms in place that are designed to meet the needs of students and families who because of poverty are prone to experiencing barriers to education and participation that can be tailored to different locations and situations. To inform appropriate responses, more work is required at a systemic level to develop and implement a tool that quantifies the cumulative cost of public education and which publicly reports data.

The South Australian Government is committed to ensuring that every child and young person across the state will be able to 'do well at all levels of learning and to have skills for life'. Addressing the systemic barriers to inclusion that children and young people face is essential to delivering on this promise. Making free and universal education a reality for all requires more than just considering the 'initial' or 'minimum' charges and fees that cover 'essentials'. It means truly understanding the collective impact that cumulative essential, non-essential, and hidden costs associated with going to school have on low income families, and then making a commitment to addressing these inequalities in practical ways that ensures no South Australian child is left 'outside' the full education experience.



Endnotes

- 1 References from Anti-Poverty Week, [Child and Family Poverty in Australia Fast Facts](#), 2021.
- 2 References from Anti-Poverty Week, [Child and Family Poverty in Australia Fast Facts](#), 2021.
- 3 The Futurity Investment Group estimated annual cost of education for a child starting at a government school in Adelaide in 2021 as follows:
 - School fees: \$340.
 - Outside tuition: \$1,230.
 - Electronic devices: \$436.
 - Uniforms and textbooks: \$461.
- 4 Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University. 2020. Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020: Who succeeds and who misses out? Mitchell Institute: Melbourne. p. vi. Available at <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/educational-opportunity-in-australia-2020.pdf>
- 5 https://www.futurityinvest.com.au/insights/futurity-blog/2021/04/20/cost-of-education-in-south-australia?_ga=2.188687272.1202228746.1633589875-781461073.1633589875
- 6 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-work-hours/average-weekly-earnings-australia/latest-release#state-and-territory>
- 7 Miranti, Riyana et al, 2018. "Child Social Exclusion, Poverty and Disadvantage in Australia," National Centre for Economic Modelling, University of Canberra, p. 32, p. 80–83. In South Australia, 17.3% of children aged 0–14 years are living in poverty (the national average is 17.2%). Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) and University of New South Wales, "Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 2, Who is Affected?" Available at <http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty>
- 8 Department for Education, South Australia. Annual Report 2019. Available at <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/education-annual-report-2019.pdf>. Department for Education, South Australia. Annual Report 2020. Available at <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/education-annual-report-2020.pdf>
- 9 This is based on a figure of 177,038 total government school enrolments in South Australia. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>
- 10 Department for Education SA, Materials and services charge instruction, p. 1. Last updated April 2021. Available at <https://edi.sa.edu.au/finance/for-schools-and-preschools/school-and-preschool-systems-and-procedures/materials-and-services-charge>
- 11 Department for Education SA, Materials and services charge instruction, p. 5. Last updated April 2021. Available at <https://edi.sa.edu.au/finance/for-schools-and-preschools/school-and-preschool-systems-and-procedures/materials-and-services-charge>
- 12 Department for Education SA, Materials and services charge instruction, p. 3. Last updated April 2021. Available at <https://edi.sa.edu.au/finance/for-schools-and-preschools/school-and-preschool-systems-and-procedures/materials-and-services-charge>
- 13 Department for Education, p. 3 of the Materials and Services charge Inclusion Last updated 4 September 2020. Available at <https://edi.sa.edu.au/finance/for-schools-and-preschools/school-and-preschool-systems-and-procedures/materials-and-services-charge/materials-and-services-charge-inclusion>
- 14 School Meal Provision: A Rapid Evidence Review, November 2020, Physical Activity, Nutrition and Obesity Research Group (PANORG) Prevention Research Collaboration, The University of Sydney <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/24060/School%20meal%20provision%20rapid%20review%20FINAL.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>