

PAC inquiry: Financial Sustainability of Schools in England

Parentkind response

December 2021

1. As a national charity, Parentkind give those with a parenting role a voice in education. We invest substantial resources in representing parent views on their child's learning to local, regional and national governments and agencies because evidence tells us that parental participation in education benefits all children in all schools and society as a whole. Parentkind is the largest network of PTA fundraisers in the UK. We bring specialist fundraising support and advice to parent volunteers so that every school can benefit from a successful PTA. Our 13,000 PTA members raise over £120+ million per year, placing us alongside some of the largest charities in the UK.

2. Parentkind's Parent Voice Report 2021 has been published¹. It was carried out online with a nationally representative sample of 3,751 parents in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 3rd June and 19th July 2021.

3. Results show that almost three quarters (73%) of parents agree that the cost of sending a child to school is increasing. Although this figure is high, it has been steadily decreasing in recent years from a 78% peak in 2017 to 76% in 2019. It is now closer to the 2016 figure of 72%. Parents from a lower socio-economic background in the C2DE category were understandably but worryingly more likely to strongly agree that the cost of sending children to school is increasing, compared to ABC1 parents (33% versus 28%). Parents with a disability and with eligibility for free school meals were much more likely to strongly agree (both sets were 44%, compared to 27% of parents with no disability or not eligible for free school meals) that the cost of sending a child to school is increasing.

4. Parental concern over the cost of sending children to school has shown a similar decrease. Where it reached over half (55%) in 2017, it fell to 51% in 2019 and is just under half (49%) in 2021, closer to the 2016 figure of 47%. Parents of a child with SEND were much more likely to strongly agree that they are concerned by the cost of sending a child to school than other parents (35% versus 14%). Parents eligible for FSM (35% versus 14%) and parents with a disability (31% versus 16%) were also much more likely to strongly agree that they are concerned by the cost of sending children to school.

5. There is a similar improvement in parents' perceptions when asked if the cost of sending children to school these days is acceptable. Almost half (49%) agreed that the costs are acceptable, compared to only 37% in 2019, 40% in 2017 and 42% in 2016. There is an exact split (49% versus 49%) of parents saying the cost of sending a child is acceptable and those who say it is not acceptable.

6. Although responses to the three questions show improvement, which is to be welcomed, the figures for parents perceiving that costs associated with sending children to school are increasing, are of concern and are unacceptable remain worryingly high. The cost of living crisis, brought about by an increase in energy and fuel costs, inflation and a rise in national insurance contributions on working parents next year are all likely to contribute to squeezed family budgets and increasing financial pressure on parents, so we would not be surprised to see parental concerns about the costs associated with sending a child to school rise proportionately again in lockstep with the increasing costs of living and rising household bills from next year.

7. We also asked, "School budgets have been under increasing pressure in recent years. Overall, in your opinion, to what extent have pressures on school budgets negatively impacted on your child's

¹ <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/uploads/files/1/Parent%20Voice%20Report%202021%20-%20In%20Full.pdf>

education?" Conversely, in comparison to the trends seen in earlier paragraphs, this question has shown a steady increase in the proportion of parents reporting a negative impact. This year, more than half (55%) reported some negative impact on their child's learning, with 17% saying 'significantly' (which was much higher than 2019's figure of 9% [the question was not asked in 2020]), and 38% reporting 'to some extent' (which is also higher than in 2019, when the figure was 35%). In 2021, under a third (31%) said the pressures on school budgets had negatively impacted on their child's education 'not very much' or 'not at all'. This has fallen sharply from 43% saying the same in 2019. Younger parents are much more likely to report a negative impact than those in older age brackets. So too parents in London are more likely to report a negative impact compared to those in other regions. Parents eligible for FSM are much more likely to report a *significant* negative impact (34% versus 12% of those not eligible). The same disproportionate reporting of a significant negative impact on education is also true for parents of BAME ethnicities (22% versus 16% white ethnicities); parents with a disability (30% versus 13% with no disability) and parents of a child with SEND (37% versus 10% without a child with SEND). The question that follows on from this research is if the government's increase in funding will have an immediate positive impact on those pupils most in need, and for those cohorts towards the end of their school journey. Parents are increasingly reporting a negative impact in their child's education caused by school budgets under pressure. Reversing that growing trend will require targeted, immediate and substantial investment.

8. Parents have a clear idea of where any additional school funding should be spent. This year, their top three priorities are learning resources such as text books and science equipment (47%), child mental health services (41%) and IT equipment (41%). Children's mental health services has increased in parents' priorities from fourth place in 2020 (with 38% of parents nominating it), to second place in 2021. Mental health services were much more likely to be nominated by mothers compared to fathers (52% versus 31%) but it was also much more prevalent for parents of C2DE backgrounds compared to ABC1 parents (46% versus 36%).

9. Parents being asked to donate to the school fund continues to be common practice among schools. In 2021, 45% of parents reported that they had been asked to donate and well over a third (38%) say they have done so. This is the highest proportion since we started tracking this measure in 2016. The mean donation given to the school fund rose this year to its highest level yet at £11.62 per month (up £3.47 on pre-pandemic levels). This has increased from £10.00 in 2020 and £8.15 in 2019. The highest mean donation among any group is reported by parents in London, at £16.18 per month, closely followed by those parents with a child with SEND (£15.98 per month). Trends observed in previous years have continued, with younger parents likelier to report being asked to donate, as were those in London and parents from BAME backgrounds. Those with a disability, those eligible for FSM and those with a child with SEND were also likelier to have been asked to give. Parents with a disability (55% being asked to donate and 48% reporting that they have done so), with a child eligible for free school meals (56% being asked to donate and 50% reporting that they have done so) or with SEND (66% asked to donate this year and 61% reporting that they have) report that they are contributing more, on average, than other parents. These parent groups also expressed greater levels of concern about the overall cost of sending their child to school. The fact that they donate more suggests higher levels of engagement with school which may correlate with their likelihood of being approached for donation, choosing to do so, and of contributing more when they do.

10. Over half of parents (55%, up slightly from 53% last year) report that they are aware of where these parental donations to the school fund are being spent this year. It is encouraging to see a trend towards greater transparency on school fund spending persist in 2021, with less than a third

(31%) unaware of how donations are spent and 13% not sure (both scores at their lowest level yet). A strong role for parental donations shows no signs of retreating in the future so it is crucial that parents continue to feel a clear sense of where these contributions are spent.

Greg Ellwood-Hughes

E: Greg.ellwood-hughes@parentkind.org.uk

T: 01732 375 451