

eis

The Educational
Institute of Scotland

EIS Briefing on the Equity Impact of School Activities

May 2022

A group of children with backpacks walking away from a school building. The children are seen from behind, walking on a paved area. The school building is visible in the background. The image is overlaid with a blue and purple gradient.

Context and purpose

In our 2015 publication ‘Face Up to Child Poverty’ the EIS highlighted the issues around the costs of participation in school trips and charity and fundraising events for the thousands of children in our schools whose families are on low income.

We advised the need for understanding of and sensitivity to, the financial impact of these kinds of school activities that have costs attached to them and that not all families are able to pay.

“In a society where more than 1 in 4 children are living in poverty... considerations need to extend to how these activities can be made fully inclusive and stigma-free for all children and young people.”

Arguably, within a comprehensive schooling system, none should be asked to pay to take part in trips, parties and proms, since all such activity is a part of the curriculum in its widest sense.

Schools and teachers rightly want to give children and young people a variety of enjoyable, enriching experiences- the aims are well-intentioned but in a society where more than 1 in 4 children are living in poverty, and where 70% of those children live in households where at least one adult is employed, considerations need to extend to how these activities can be made fully inclusive and stigma-free for all children and young people.

In a report published in March of this year, ‘The Cost of Having Fun at School’, Child Poverty Action Group highlighted similar issues:

‘For many children, events, celebrations and special activities are some of the things they remember most about their time at school. We know that many pupils look forward to these activities and gain a lot from them, and that’s why they are an important part of the school year. However, for some children, these days and events draw attention to their families’ financial circumstances, and are a frequent and unwelcome reminder that, unlike their peers, they are not able to join in with all the opportunities school has to offer.’

In 2022, we are sharply aware of the disproportionate financial impact of Covid and the soaring cost of living increases already wreaking further hardship upon the poorest families.

It is against this backdrop of rising levels and intensification of poverty that the EIS is updating its advice for members with regards to 'fun' school activities, many of which take place during the summer term, but which are scheduled all year round too.

This briefing is intended to highlight the various pressing issues and to suggest ways that they can be navigated sensitively within our schools in the maximum interests of equity and inclusion.



Planning Activities: a whole-school approach

Schools can be very busy with events, activities and outings throughout the course of the year.

Staff planning these together well in advance can help give an overview of all the opportunities that children will be invited to participate in over the course of the school session- the number, timing and any potential costs. Some questions to ask:

- Are there too many occasions where families might be asked to fund their child's participation in activities?
- Are too many coming close together?
- Is enough notice going to be given of each?
- Would there be particular difficulties for families at even greater risk of poverty- for example, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic families, homes with single parents or where a family member is disabled?
- Are there ways of providing the same or similar experiences, cost-free to all? Or at least to those least able to afford?

“As well as looking at any costs associated with individual activities, both up-front and hidden, consideration of how the total cost of all activities combined per child per year, would also be informative.”

As well as looking at any costs associated with individual activities, both up-front and hidden, consideration of how the total cost of all activities combined per child per year, would also be informative. Where families have more than one child attending the school, this will be even more important as an exercise.

Having looked across the whole year at all likely events, parties, fund-raising activities, staff should then look at how costs can be eliminated or at least reduced, and how even where costs will remain in place, these can be covered in stigma-free ways, for children and young people for whom even relatively low costs, will present a barrier to participation or a hardship.

Asking the Parent Council and/or other groups of parents to look over the plans would be a useful way of getting feedback on affordability. These conversations should be handled with due sensitivity, particularly where the parents being consulted are living on low income themselves. Their views will be especially important.

Overall, the EIS would advise that plans for ‘fun’ activities should be as cost neutral as possible for all families, and that where payments are being sought, these are kept to a minimum, suitably spaced out, and removed in stigma-free ways for children whose families would otherwise be unable to afford them.



School Trips

Costs associated with school trips can be anxiety-inducing for families living on low incomes. Parents who are under pressure to manage meagre finances sufficiently to cover the costs of necessities have little or nothing left over to pay for school outings.

Even when the cost of a school trip is relatively low - only a few pounds - many families are unable to make the weekly income stretch to this, particularly at short notice.

There are often hidden costs on top of the payment that the school might ask for to cover the trip- lunches and snacks, spending money and clothing, for example, all additional expenses commonly associated with school trips. Clothing and more specialist/niche equipment can be particularly costly for residential trips on top of any main charge for the experience.

Where children and young people from low-income families are participating in outings, especially those which may involve lengthy travel and extended periods away from home, there could be issues with this group of pupils/students not having enough money to purchase food while on the trip.

Although many will be entitled to free school lunches, those from P6-S6 are at risk of feeling stigmatised because of continued means-testing of free school meal entitlement, and may reject the free meal on offer; others who take the free packed lunch may need to eat again before returning home in the event of the trip spanning a whole day or more.

Families with more than one child at school may be being asked to pay for multiple outings at a time, either causing real financial hardship to the family or resulting in the non-participation of children and young people from those families in the outing(s).

Often children and young people from poor families will feign lack of interest in the trip on offer simply because they know that their families will struggle or be unable, to afford the cost, so do not even wish to ask at home for the money.

“Costs associated with school trips can be anxiety-inducing for families living on low incomes.”

What you and your colleagues can do

- ✓ Agree a policy on school trips which ensures that they are fully inclusive of all children and young people
- ✓ Arrange for the school to retain a special fund to cover the cost of school trips, ideally for all pupils, or at least for pupils whose families cannot afford to pay
- ✓ Make sure that all hidden costs have been considered and mitigated as far as possible in ways that are stigma-free
- ✓ Ensure that plenty of advance notice of school trips is given to families in order that they can plan for any associated cost
- ✓ Pay particular attention to the needs of families who have more than one child at the school
- ✓ Contact local charities and businesses that may be able to help with donations or sponsorship of the costs of the trip
- ✓ Place limits on spending money for all pupils and provide it from a school fund, stigma-free, to those who would otherwise not be able to afford to have it.



Charity and Fundraising Events

Our Face Up to Child Poverty publication advised that no assumption should be made that all children and young people can afford to make even small donations to well-intentioned charity initiatives organised by the school.

The same issues are pertinent here as in the previous section:

- many families simply do not have any additional funds to spare;
- some families have no funds at all when they are subject to harsh benefit sanctions or are in the process of applying for Universal Credit, which can take weeks; and
- thousands are reliant on foodbanks and other charity donations themselves.

In some ways, charity and fundraising activities can be even more stigmatising for children and young people whose families struggle to afford participation. The CPAG report highlights this.

'...these days regularly involve direct requests for cash...Children reported that donations for charity and fundraising days are often collected in front of them in classrooms by teachers and pupils, making it obvious which of their peers have made a donation.'

The divide between the children and young people who can and can't afford is very obvious, too, when the fundraising involves purchasing items such as poppies for Remembrance Day, red noses for Comic Relief and homemade sweets and cakes donated for charity drives such as Children in Need or Macmillan Cancer.

The CPAG research highlights how stigmatising this can be for children and young people:

'Some people cried because they didn't get one. They just sat there looking at the cakes. They looked sad'. (Pupil, age 10)'

'You don't have to buy one (a red nose), but I feel sad for the people who can't afford it.' (Pupil, age 9)'

“Many families simply do not have additional funds to spare...thousands are reliant on food banks themselves.”

Non-uniform days

A common approach to fund-raising is to organise non-uniform days, which on the face of it, look like good opportunities for young people to ditch their uniforms and to dress up or down in their favourite clothes, in return for a cash donation.

Previous EIS research has found that non-uniform days can present real issues from children and young people from poorer families. Many don't have alternative clothes, shoes and jackets to wear that make them feel socially comfortable amongst their more affluent peers who are likely to be wearing the latest fashions or sought-after brands.

This leaves them with the choice of attending school and feeling out of place and stigmatised, either by wearing uniform or less 'socially acceptable' (or more culturally diverse) clothing compared with their peers; or staying off school altogether. EIS members have previously reported that large numbers of young people from poorer backgrounds opt for the latter, meaning that not only do they miss out on a social experience, they lose valuable learning and teaching time too.

Many of the same issues are likely to be in play where in-school parties are being organised with pupils being allowed not to wear uniform.

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Dress-up days

Where pupils are encouraged to wear particular kinds of clothes to mark certain days- for example, something red on Show Racism the Red Card's 'Wear Red Day', outfits to look like characters in books for World Book Day or festive jumpers for Christmas Jumper Day- not all families will have the relevant clothing at home and would be under pressure to buy it, commonly leading to non-participation and missing out on key learning and experiences, or further stigmatisation of many children.

These impacts are recorded, also, in the CPAG research.

'Some people will ask why you don't have a Christmas jumper.' (Pupil, age 10)

'Yes, I have struggled (with the costs), there have been dress up days where having to buy different items has been an unnecessary expense, especially when you have more than 1 child.' (Parent)

What you and your colleagues can do

- ✓ The intensifying financial struggles of families should be borne in mind when planning, communicating and organising charity and fundraising events.
- ✓ Ensure due sensitivity and inclusivity when any requests are made of children and young people in the classroom or letters sent home to parents/carers, requesting their support in charity events.
- ✓ Bear in mind that in the current socio-economic climate, it is increasingly the case that many of the families who may be asked to donate to charity will themselves be in receipt of charity from food banks and other organisations.
- ✓ Where there has been no whole-school discussion of children and young people's experiences of poverty and how this might impact on their participation in fundraising events, EIS members should raise the matter with the management team within the school as a starting point.

- ✓ Consider the number of charity/fundraising activities that the school is involved in per year and look at the overall requests being made of families- could this be causing hardship or stigma?
- ✓ Discuss the purpose of any fundraising proposals. For example, is it appropriate to ask families to raise money for school funds, especially in the current economic climate and the rising costs of food, fuel and other essentials whilst the real-terms value of wages and benefits are falling? Is it appropriate to ask families to donate to foodbanks when they might be reliant upon them themselves?
- ✓ Where it is collegiately agreed that certain fundraising activities will go ahead, design them so that there is a variety of ways that children and young people can contribute – for example, making things, designing publicity - with these being recognised and valued equally to bringing money from home.
- ✓ Find anonymous, stigma-free ways that children can choose to make donations on behalf of their families...or not.
- ✓ Think about alternative sources of donations other than children and young people’s homes- for example, pupils could participate in bag packing at local supermarkets, car washing, etc. These activities offer benefits in themselves and are an alternative to simply asking for money from home.
- ✓ Consider more inclusive alternatives to non-uniform days/ occasions and dressing-up days- for example if school funds allow, decorating school-bought plain t-shirts in school.

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In-school parties, fayres and celebrations

Many of the issues already outlined with regards to clothing are pertinent here too.

Other similar issues can stem from children and young people being asked to bring sweet treats, snacks and drinks from home by way of contribution to parties, fayres or the marking of religious festivals, or often to purchase them from a tuck-shop or stalls during certain types of event.

Stalls might also sell items such as books, toys and gifts, or offer face painting and such like for a fee. These are treats that are sadly out of reach for thousands of children.

Entry fees for parties, discos and fayres can also pose difficulty for young people whose families are on low income. The combined costs and unaffordability result in many young people just not being able to take part at all, or to take part in a more limited way- for example, by not being able to buy anything from the tuck-shop or stalls when their friends can- which sets them apart from the rest of their peers, in some cases meaning that they cannot fully participate within the wider school community.

What you and your colleagues can do

- ✓ Consider setting up a school fund to cover the cost of parties and celebrations so that they are completely free for all children and young people
- ✓ Make entry to all in-school events free
- ✓ Reflect on the purpose of school fayres- often these involve private companies and small businesses selling their good to pupils. Is this appropriate and inclusive?
- ✓ Consider alternative cost-free approaches to school fayres where all stalls are open to all young people and are free- local charities and businesses could be asked to donate/fund or school funds could be used to cover the cost of staging this kind of event.



School proms

Over the past two decades, school proms to mark the end of Secondary school for post-16 school leavers, and more recently, Primary 7 leavers, have grown both in popularity and lavishness.

In 2019 The Herald newspaper reported on this phenomenon, highlighting how what might in the past have been a humble school disco in the gym hall to mark the end of school, had evolved to become a much grander affair involving a costly meal and drinks in a hotel; extravagant limousine travel; expensive dresses, suits and kilts; and high-cost hair-cuts, make-up and beauty treatments.

Initially making its way into the culture to mark the leaving of Secondary school, it is now common for schools to organise Primary 7 proms and for families to seek to emulate the scale of the spending on senior proms.

The 2019 Herald article reported that Marion Davis, Head of Policy at One Parent Families Scotland, had called on the Scottish Government to look at ways of

‘curbing the excess to ensure that teenagers in the grip of poverty are not frozen out of what has evolved into a new rite of passage.’

More recently, the CPAG Report also underlined the challenges that school proms can create for families on low income, faced with the cost of tickets, transport, outfits, hair and make-up.

Many young people who took part in the CPAG research having attended proms, suggested that the experience ‘wasn’t worth it’ and that alternative ways of celebrating the end of their time at high school would have been better.

‘I maybe spent about £200 on stuff for the prom. It wasn’t worth it for the event because it wasn’t that great.’ (Pupil, age 16)

The CPAG research also included a comparison between two nearby schools:

‘In one school the leavers’ celebration cost some pupils around £245. This comprised £200 for prom outfits, £25 for tickets and £20 for the leavers’ hoody. Whereas in a school nearby, the head

teacher capped spending on the prom at £20 and developed a well-stocked prom bank in the months leading up to the event to ensure that pupils did not have to buy costly outfits.’

In the first case, the risk is that young people from lower income families miss out altogether; or attend but feel that they haven’t been able to ‘keep up’ with their peers; and/or attend with their families going into debt or going without essentials, so that that their child doesn’t miss out on a seminal social experience.

It is worth bearing in mind that in the context of the rising cost of living, many families are already having to choose daily between heating and eating.

Leavers’ Hoodies

As well as expensive activities to mark the transition from P7 to S1 or the end of high school, it has become common for schools or Parents’ Councils to organise ‘leavers’ hoodies’ for young people to purchase. At around £20 each, this is a big expense for families on low income. Many families can’t afford the cost and are conspicuous in their poverty when the rest of the class or the year group are wearing the hoodies to school. Others can’t afford the cost of the hoody but go without other essentials at home so that their child won’t feel stigma and exclusion at school. Neither of these scenarios is acceptable.

“It is worth bearing in mind that in the context of the rising cost of living, many families are already having to choose daily between heating and eating.”



What you and your colleagues can do

- ✓ Look at the plans for leavers' celebrations and consider what might be the impact on low and lower income families, especially in light of the cost of living increases.
- ✓ Consider any plans or requests for leavers' hoodies to be printed and sold to pupils. How will families on low income be impacted? How might children be excluded and stigmatised? How could these issues be discussed sensitively with young people and parents? Are there alternatives that are inclusive? If not, how will stigma and exclusion for any young person be avoided?
- ✓ Discuss ways of designing leavers' events to limit costs and stigma, and to maximise inclusivity, including of minority ethnic groups. This might involve an alternative to what has become the traditional but very expensive, exclusive prom experience.
- ✓ Look at ways of making leavers' celebrations, including proms, cost-free for students- local charities and businesses might be able to support.
- ✓ Tap into young people's interest in sustainability to set up a prom/ party clothes cost-free hire facility, again thinking about ethnic and cultural diversity within your school community.
- ✓ Consult parents and young people on plans, with a particular focus on affordability, in cognisance of the need for sensitivity in approaching these issues, especially with less affluent young people and families.

Call for good practice sharing

Any member who wishes to share good practice in addressing the equity impact of school activities on children and young people in their establishment is welcome to get in touch with the EIS Education and Equality Department by contacting: jharris@eis.org.uk



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