



Becoming a More Cost- Friendly School



Every child has the right to an education that enables them to fully participate in their learning, regardless of their family's economic status.

Parents should not be put in a position where they have to choose between ensuring their child has enough food or the 'right' uniform, transport, a school excursion, or extracurricular activity they know their child enjoys.

Every child has the right to an education whether their family is rich or poor. Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets 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. In addition, Article 26 states that the Government should provide extra money for the children of families who are in need.

A Cost Friendly School:

-  works with the government, local councils, and not for profit organisations to find grants, supports, and spare equipment, devices and materials, to enable all students to fully engage in their education including school excursions and extracurricular activities
-  works with families to spread costs out and advises on sources of assistance for grant funding or interest free loans
-  ensures the cost of uniforms, materials, equipment, and educational experiences are kept as low as possible
-  provides a stock of uniforms, materials and equipment for temporary use by those students who are in need; and
-  provides access to free period products in all school facilities.

The reality

The cost of education in South Australia is an issue for many children and young people, especially those who come from households struggling financially and who are part of larger families with multiple school age children.

The costs of individual items or school events and activities may seem insignificant on their own, but the day-to-day reality of these costs, along with their cumulative impact means some students are 'left out', 'standing out' and 'missing out'. The impact of this is significant not only in terms of their education but also in relation to their personal development and sense of belonging and connection to their peers, school and broader community. This impact can change the course of their lives and lead them to face poverty and disadvantage over a life time that can also become intergenerational.

More than 1 in 6 children in South Australia are estimated to be living in poverty¹ with this reality impacting their school education in the following ways:

- They often go to school hungry and unable to take a lunch.
- They are being punished or sent home because they don't have the right uniform.
- They miss out on school excursions including school camps because their families can't afford to pay for them to attend.
- They cannot take-up or sustain their involvement in extracurricular activities because they don't have the right kit, or cannot afford the participation fees, or costs of transport to and from training and games.

- They miss school because they don't have period products.

Typical costs involved in sending a child to school include:

- the annual Schools' Materials and Services charge
- books, stationery and other curriculum related resources and equipment
- uniforms for school and sport, including shoes
- lunches and snacks
- digital equipment, data and reliable access to the Internet
- school excursions including school camps
- transport to and from school; and
- costs associated with extracurricular activities such as sport, music, drama, dance and theatre (as examples) including uniforms, equipment and participation fees.

[The world would be better if...]

"...Everyone could join the same activities no matter what. Trips and activities wouldnt be so expensive so everyone could participate and have fun in all sorts of things." – 11 year old

How cost of living challenges effect students

Cost of living challenges have a significant impact on a student's capacity to participate and connect with their school and community. It also impacts on their friendships and individual sense of self-worth and belonging.

For many South Australian families, free and universal education is a pipedream that ignores the cumulative essential, non-essential, and hidden costs associated with their children going to school to access what is their fundamental right to a full education.

School attendance is strongly linked to socio economic status with some of our most disadvantaged schools reporting attendance rates as low as 50 per cent. This impacts the educational and social development of those children and young people affected.

The struggle to afford the cost of food, transport, and other basic items, contributes to exclusion from key opportunities to learn. This exclusion includes limited access to school sporting activities and other extracurricular activities such as music, dance, theatre, or gymnastics as examples. They also usually miss out on school camps and excursions that their peers spend weeks looking forward to and talking about in the school yard, both in the lead up as well as when they return. It makes those who don't attend feel outside the common experiences and that somehow they don't belong or deserve the same opportunities as others their age.

This can have a lifetime impact on their hopes and dreams, limiting their aspirations and belief that they can achieve them.

Missing out on what your peers enjoy is not only embarrassing, it is fundamentally unfair. We must and can do better to ensure all children experience the same access to school opportunities, initiatives, equipment, materials and events.

To achieve this, South Australian schools need to commit to addressing the inequalities that exist, applying practical solutions that will ensure no South Australian child is left 'outside' the opportunities a full education experience should provide.

“ It feels like schools punish you for being poor – having to stay in class during 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

“ A lack of nutritional food and food in general is an ongoing concern for some families in our community...” – Teacher

“ Some families supply students with their lunches quite well whilst others don't manage to do this every day of the week.” – Principal

Left out

Disadvantaged children and young people frequently report feeling ‘left out’ and that they do not belong at school. This sense of not belonging impacts on their connection with others; their peers, teachers, educators, and school administrators, as well as with the broader community. This negatively impacts on their ability to develop friendships and to build a personal sense of self-worth so essential throughout childhood. It also increases the likelihood over time, that they will completely disengage from school and their education, causing a significant reduction in the opportunities they will have over a lifetime.

Many young people say they feel ‘embarrassed’ and ‘ashamed’ about not having enough money to participate in the learning experiences their fellow students are able to afford.

Difficulties paying for uniforms can be particularly problematic, and is a common reason for students to be excluded from a particular class or activity. In some schools it is even a reason to be suspended. In addition, when the cost of school-based activities, practices and initiatives, require ‘extra money’, those students who cannot afford to participate feel more isolated and excluded causing them to have feelings of shame and embarrassment that impacts their confidence and self-esteem.

Standing out

Some markers of poverty stand out more than others. They include the quality and newness of a school uniform and school shoes, or what food a child or young person brings to school for lunch.

We know the impact of not being able to afford hygiene products such as deodorant, toothpaste and soap. For many young people who menstruate, ‘period poverty’ – a lack of access to period products – is also an issue that impacts significantly on their ability to attend or fully engage with their education. Often students who are menstruating will choose not to attend school when they do not have a period product available, for fear of being embarrassed or shamed while there.

Missing out

Schools located in disadvantaged areas throughout South Australia find it hard to offer all students opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, school camps and school excursions. This missing out can be even more pronounced for students attending schools in rural and remote areas, where the costs of travelling to such activities can be prohibitive.

Although free public transport for excursions around metropolitan Adelaide is available to primary school students, it is offered only within standard school hours. This limits the time students can spend at their destination. Schools in more remote areas face enormous costs to travel anywhere beyond their local area.

While schools do receive some additional funding for students from families that need extra financial support and/or concessions, principals and educators say this funding is not nearly enough to enable low-SES and regional/remote schools to provide their students with the same opportunities currently being made available to students attending schools in Adelaide.

How can the State and Local Government help?

There are changes that could be made by the South Australian Government to ensure children and young people from families who are known to have a lower socio-economic status to enjoy the same educational experiences as their peers.

- The South Australian Public Transport Authority could provide students whose families are in receipt of a School Card access to free public transport to and from school and extracurricular activities.
- Additional transport funds could be made available to disadvantaged regional and remote schools to enable them to support all students undertake active learning experiences outside the region they live in, including opportunities to travel to Adelaide.
- Preventive Health SA and the Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing could work together to ensure that no South Australian student is excluded from participating in extracurricular activities due to prohibitive costs associated with their participation such as uniforms, shoes and equipment, or transport.

The Department for Education could:

- work collaboratively with schools and parent groups to develop and implement an audit tool quantifying the cumulative costs of public education at an individual school level, publishing this data annually

- continue to subsidise the Schools Materials and Services charges
- continue to provide free digital devices and access to the Internet for those students who need it
- continue to fund the supply of free period products in all public schools and actively encourage school participation
- support the State's most disadvantaged schools to provide their students with a nutritious cooked lunch
- provide free school uniforms and sports kits to all School Card holders as required
- cover the cost of school related transport for all School Card holders; and
- subsidise the cost of excursions and extracurricular activities for disadvantaged schools addressing any barriers to participation by both primary and secondary school students.

The Department for Human Services could:

- support non-government organisations to fund initiatives in schools that support disadvantaged students with their learning and participation in extracurricular activities such as materials, equipment, uniforms, and fees.

Local Councils could:

- help students across their communities through the provision of grants, free bike loans, or in-kind support, such as free access to council facilities, including gyms, sports centres and swimming pools, provision of library books, loan of music instruments, access to free data and the Internet, pooling of transport, etc; and
- expand access to free public Wi-Fi so that it includes all council buildings including libraries and community centres.

How can schools help?

Given the extent of the cost-of-living challenges currently being experienced by families across South Australia, all-school leaders and governing councils need to develop and provide options that will help families meet the costs associated with their child's or children's education. Importantly these options needs to be made available in ways that avoid the family or children experiencing any stigma or embarrassment.

Many individual South Australian schools located in disadvantaged communities have already developed such strategies and policies providing for a range of resources and adopting practices that are inclusive and supportive of all their students and by extension their families.

All South Australian schools can help families by:

- Making information relating to the true cost of going to school available throughout the year. This includes itemising the full range of "optional charges" that families can expect to incur so these can be planned for in advance and not be expected to be met at short notice.
- Put financial measures such as short-term interest free loans, staggered payments and payment plans in place, to help families spread costs over the year.
- Establish simple uniform and kit rules that enable parents to source generic items cheaply.
- Organise recycling of books, stationery, bicycles, equipment, materials, and school uniform items in a non-stigmatised way, such as at an end of year second hand sale or swap meet.
- Seek advice from both the Department for Education and local council in regard to any relevant grants or funds available to support disadvantaged students and their families, including which local charities schools can confidently approach for financial or practical support, or direct families to for such support.

All schools can support disadvantaged students and their families by:

- Promoting a culture that does not single out or “other” students who do not have the right books or stationery each day, who don’t always bring lunch to school, or who do not have the right uniform or sports kit they need to participate.
- Maintaining a stock of spare uniforms, sports kit items and essential books or equipment available so that students who don’t have these items are not excluded or disadvantaged.
- Collaborating with the charitable sector to invite organisations like Foodbank, The Smith Family and Schools Plus to help support students from disadvantaged families.
- Working with charities/not-for-profits to establish free school lunch programs at priority high need schools.

Endnotes

- 1 ACOSS, 2022, *Poverty in Australia 2022: A Snapshot*. Available at: https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp_content/uploads/2022/10/Poverty-in-Australia-2020_A-snapshot.pdf.

For more information about the True Cost of Going to School read the Commissioner’s Spotlight Report of the same name available here: <https://www.cryp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Spotlight-on-the-True-Cost-of-Going-to-School.pdf>

The Commissioner’s Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* (‘the Act’). The Commissioner’s role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia’s children and young people. This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner’s strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. Children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making, and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation. The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways

in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

Please note: All quotes have been reproduced verbatim.

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