The Cost of a School Day

As headteacher of a truly comprehensive secondary school it pains me on a daily basis to be aware that insufficient household income can mean that young people simply do not have the resources needed for school and often cannot easily afford to take part in the wide range of our school activities. I am therefore fully aware that, on occasion, this can put some of our pupils at risk of missing out on opportunities at school and as a consequence feeling different, excluded and unhappy.

Currently 1 in 4 children in Scotland live in poverty. 30% of children in poverty have parents who are not working. 70% of children in poverty have at least one parent who is working. We all know that poverty is by its nature often dynamic and people move in and out of poverty—there are transient, recurrent and persistent states of poverty depending on individual and family circumstances.

Findings of a recent ‘Growing Up in Scotland’ survey have revealed that over the last 7 years only 45% of children in Scotland HAVE NOT experienced at least one year of growing up in poverty.
The Child Poverty Action Group recently commissioned and produced some support materials to assist schools and school parent councils with ideas to alleviate some of these concerns. While it is clear that issues surrounding the ways to tackle poverty are societal, not just related to school, it is clear our school community has its own part to play in working to alleviate some of the issues faced by our pupils and parents/carers who are confronted with the often daily dilemma of providing support to allow all pupils to engage fully in our school experiences.

What the reading of the research has reinforced is that as a school we need to raise awareness of the supports we offer to parents and pupils, while at the same time observing the required confidentiality required when any parent or pupil requests assistance. Every communication to parents/carers with regards to a trip/excursion/event should contain a standard paragraph inviting parents to contact the child’s Pupil Support teacher if cost is an issue preventing participation.

The school is already in receipt of monies under the Scottish Government’s Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) where financial resources are allocated to the school based on the number of S1-S3 pupils in receipt of free school meals. We have already identified a structured approach to establish a supportive mentoring programme for some of our pupils who are in need of more support to achieve key targets in relation to matching their potential to their performance, have the capacity to set up bespoke nurture programmes as and when required and have invested in IT programmes to support/reinforce basic literacy and numeracy skills for some of our junior pupils. On an ongoing basis, we will look at other ways in which we can direct teaching and support resources to those most in need—in relation to both a school and home environment, for example, equity pupils will not pay for key equipment/resources in practical subjects.

In addition, we have now established a dedicated ‘Equity Fund’ through our School Fund and PEF resources to support pupils and families to ensure equity in as many aspects of school life as we can. We are also thankful to the Loaningdale Trust who have agreed to contribute generously to the school on an ongoing annual basis to assist in our efforts to subsidise and support pupils travel/transport/trip funding/educational support where required. In addition, Womankind Clydesdale also offer practical and financial support as required to families, especially in relation to school clothing and footwear (womankindcl@gmail.com).
This communication is designed to promote the supports we offer and encourage any Biggar High pupils and/or parents/carers who may be finding certain aspects of supporting their child’s school life a struggle to let us know about the issues at hand. With confidentiality guaranteed, we would like at every stage or every circumstance, the opportunity to support where we can to ensure that as far as possible all our pupils have access to the same experiences as and when they are available, whether this is in school/class or beyond.

I would encourage all Biggar High parents/carers who find themselves in a situation, at any point in their child’s school career where they cannot financially support their child for whatever reason, to contact their child’s Pupil Support teacher in the first instance and have a supportive conversation that will hopefully lead to the school being able to offer the appropriate support/resource provision to allow their child to receive as full and as rounded a school experience as possible.

PUPIL SUPPORT TEAM

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As far as possible as a school, we endeavour to match key recommendations that the Poverty Action Group research has noted as being important markers of supporting children from a low-income background - including:

- Giving our pupils the benefit of the doubt - our school staff and pupils should hold no assumptions about financial situations.

- Ensuring as far as possible an ‘affordable school year’ - spacing in-school and out of school events out to try to avoid hotspots leading to increasing financial pressures.

- Running fund-raising activities which do not always ask families to contribute

- Lending resources without trouble

- Modifying expectations and tasks; offering/ providing support to access IT

- Having consistent expectations and practice between staff members on uniform, resources etc.

- Rewards and merits unaffected by issues relating to finances at home

- Anti-bullying alert to income-based bullying or stigma

- Greater poverty awareness among our own school community

- Making sure families/ students are aware of their financial entitlements - clothing grants, free meals, EMA...

- Staff discretion and empathy in relation to equity issues

- Ensuring wherever possible that costs for trips are affordable

- Covering costs/ subsidising and supporting discounts where possible

- Systems in place where pupils/ parents/ carers do not feel embarrassed asking for help/ subsidy
In consultation with our Parent Council- we will continue to use these key ‘benchmarks’ to look at ways in which can further enhance our support to families who may be finding the various costs of a child’s school experience a challenge- the Child Poverty Action Group’s support materials provided us with a basis for that discussion. If interested the link http://www.cpag.org.uk/cost-school-day will take you to the document itself.

In general, school costs can be broken down into several key categories:

**Clothing grant and buying uniforms**

Parents on certain benefits can access a clothing grant to help with school uniform costs. At the moment the South Lanarkshire Grant is £100.

Information about entitlement to clothing grants and how to apply is available on the South Lanarkshire Council website: www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk/info/200186/ or speak to your child’s Pupil Support teacher.

Although our dress code rules allow for non-badged sweatshirts etc. there may be situations where the expense of clothing exceeds this ceiling, especially with regard to footwear. If this is the case, we would encourage you to contact the school to speak to your child’s Pupil Support teacher or to contact Womankind Clydesdale (womankindcl@gmail.com). Our supportive school ethos encourages us to take the position on uniform that pupils can wear whatever option they feel most comfortable with- polo shirt/ sweatshirt/ shirt and tie/ blazer . . . and that if support is required in the purchase of the required uniform then a contact to the appropriate Pupil Support teacher should be made.
**Travelling to School**

Transport costs are significant for low-income families and can affect children and young people’s attendance and participation at school. I am well aware that in more rural areas, own transport is a necessity rather than a luxury and families can struggle to meet the fuel and running costs of journeys to school.

Although our council have maintained the provision of free transport to and from school, I am aware that any other activities out-with the school day are heavily reliant on parent transport and that this is not always easy- especially given some of the sizeable distances from our school to some of our local communities.

If pupils want to participate in any school activity and feel that financial circumstances may not allow for this to happen, I would encourage parents/carers to contact their child’s Pupil Support teacher to identify ways in which the school could support pupil engagement- whether for example this is an after school supported study session, an after-school club or an event which means the pupil may be returning late to school and required to be collected. As much as possible we try to run clubs and supported study provision during lunchtimes to allow access for all.

**Fundraising events**

Special days, events and activities are a fun part of school life and often raise valuable funds to subsidise trips and provide additional resources. However, such events can create difficulties for some children due to lack of immediate funds, hidden costs and feeling embarrassed and marginalised if they are unable to take part. In some of our communities, particularly rural ones, families travel long distances to work and making extra trips to school has a large impact on their finances.

All our fund-raising activities take place during the school day- we have two dedicated Charity fund-raising events in November and March and three dedicated ‘non-uniform’ days at the end of each term to raise funds to support pupil-related school activities. The main charity fund-raiser invites all pupils to contribute what they can and the non-uniform days ask for £1 per person or a donation. With regard to these activities we try to be as sensitive as we can and collections are made by senior pupils in classes at the start of each non-uniform day and at least one week’s notice is given of the details of such events.
School Trips

School trips can be difficult for families on low incomes to afford. Missing trips means that children miss fun, new experiences and personal development and feel left out and families can be reluctant to ask for financial help.

The school encourages at all times staff to arrange events outside of school that we feel will enrich pupils’ school and life experiences. From August 2019, for ‘local trips’, events directly related to the curriculum and for our S1 residential experience, equity pupils’ trip costs will be met by the school.

If there is an out of school activity being run and a pupil is reluctant to participate because of family financial constraints we would encourage you in confidence to contact your child’s Pupil Support teacher to seek support, thus allowing us the opportunity to actively identify ways to subsidise/support attendance and participation in the identified activity.

For longer (more expensive) school trips we try to ensure that the maximum advance notice is given to allow pupils and parents to work out a staged payment plan that provides all the opportunity for participation and the ParentPay system we now have in operation allows this to run more smoothly. With negotiation, the school can look at extending deadline for deposits and look at a longer timescale for staged payments etc. (obviously the details of this will be dependent on the conditions set down by tour/ trip organisers etc.).

Again, we would encourage all pupils who may be interested in participating in any activity to start with the view that participation is possible, to express an interest and then have conversations with their Pupil Support teacher in the first instance about how to achieve this. Based on my own personal experience growing up, I am aware that children will automatically self-limit information going to parents about certain school activities because they do not want to place parents under undue pressure to make financial commitments that are going to be challenging.

I am not naïve enough to state that this will no longer happen, but it would be re-assuring in relation to our vision of wanting all children to achieve their true potential that we at least had the opportunity to provide ways to ensure pupils access the activities which they enjoy/ appreciate/ want to experience.
Eating at School

Lack of food and poor nutrition are realities for some children and young people in Scotland. Food costs can be significant and receiving Free School Meals can lessen the financial burden on low income families. However not every family entitled to free meals applies for them and not every child receiving free meals takes them.

We would encourage any parent presently on low income to investigate the conditions under which free school meals can be provided.

Information about entitlement to free school meals and how to apply is available on the South Lanarkshire Council website: www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk/info/200186/ or speak to your child’s Pupil Support teacher. If you have any problems in accessing IT or require further assistance in completing the online application we would be more than happy to support you to do so (simply contact your child’s Pupil Support teacher in the first instance).

We are aware that a large minority of our pupils do not take up this entitlement, although the keypad system we operate in school for all our pupils ensures privacy and confidentiality. All pupils now have free access to water at all times during the school day and we would encourage them to use this facility - both on cost and health/ nutrition grounds.

School Clubs

Schools offer a range of lunchtime and after-school clubs, most of which are free or at low cost. These clubs are a valuable resource for children, making new interests and experiences accessible to them. However, small costs can still stand in the way of participation.

Again as noted previously, as the vast majority of our pupils are reliant on school transport at the end of the school day; many of our wider curricular and extra-curricular activities therefore take place at lunchtimes. If a pupil feels that there is a reason that they cannot participate because of the lack of a resource/ equipment this should not prove a barrier to involvement and the pupil or parent/carer should approach their Pupil Support teacher in confidence to explain their situation, thus allowing us to identify a solution.
Home Learning

Although most home learning tasks have little or no costs, there are exceptions that can create difficulties for children from low-income households e.g. craft projects and homework that requires computers, online access, software and printers.

We are already aware of local community issues in relation to intermittent or poor broadband connection(s) that inhibit some pupils’ access to online materials and working. In relation to Home Economics, Art and Technical classes, we aim to keep costs to a minimum and do subsidise the cost of materials in these practical classes. Equity pupils do not pay for any of these resources/ costs.

We are also aware in the years ahead of the increased use of smart phone and other digital technologies to support learning- in relation to school work, homework and home study- and that this does potentially create situations of disadvantage for some of our pupils. Any pupil who for whatever reason cannot access technology will be provided with paper copies of any classwork/ homework materials and teachers should be aware of this from the start of each new session. Please let your child’s Pupil Support teacher know immediately if this is or becomes an issue at some point during the school session so that teaching staff can prepare accordingly.

The school is also actively looking at ways to support pupils who for whatever reason do not have access to IT. Again, if the school is not aware of issues surrounding this area then the pupil experience will be affected and we would again encourage pupils/ parents to make representation through Pupil Support if any assistance or support is required. The school runs staffed lunchtime ‘homework’ clubs where access to IT is offered as required and the community library has IT facilities which can be booked as and when required if pupils/ parents are members. In partnership with our Parent Council, we are also actively chasing funding streams to allow pupils who do not have access to IT at home to have the facility to do so.

In relation to class texts, in the vast majority of our subject disciplines pupils have access to all relevant course texts. As noted above, we do offer/ run lunchtime homework clubs and access to IT facilities for pupils requiring access as and when required. Teachers also ensure when asked that paper copies of
class materials are provided to pupils if required if they are unable to access materials online for whatever reason.

In addition, most if not all photocopying required by students is done in school and tied into subject budgets. If pupils required additional materials to be copied or printed this should not be a problem. Many subjects run lunchtime supported study sessions and many of our teaching staff are very accommodating at offering additional one to one support if required at lunchtimes on an ‘informal’ basis.

Again, if parents/carers do have issues with regard to the costs of accessing our full curriculum we can look at the facility of loaning IT, purchasing study materials etc. if contact is made through our Pupil Support Team.

**Attitudes to Poverty**

Many teachers, children and parents are aware of poverty and try to be sensitive to the challenges that low-income families face. However, in the media and wider society people are increasingly likely to think that poverty is the fault of the individual. In some more affluent areas poverty can be hidden.

As a ‘Rights Respecting School’ we pride ourselves on the inclusive ethos and positive engagement that exists between staff and pupils and between pupils at all levels of school life. It is with a strong degree of pride that, although we deal on a regular basis with friendship fall outs and picking up the pieces over social media conversations outside of school that have led to arguments etc., we very rarely have to deal with any individual issues where a pupil is bullied or discriminated on the basis of conversations about money and wealth.

As part of a Rights Respecting School Learning Community our pupils already come to Biggar High with a strong sense of the importance of fairness and social justice. It was also pleasant and re-assuring to note that recent surveys with new pupils to the school have emphasised how welcoming Biggar High School is and that this has helped them settle quickly into the new routines of our school.
If you are aware of any examples where your child expresses concern over any form of bullying he/she is experiencing with regard to financial issues, we would ask that this is communicated to us at the earliest opportunity to allow us to have restorative conversations with the perpetrator(s) and offer support and re-assurance to any pupil experiencing any such unacceptable attitudes.