Parentkind Policy Position
School funding

Context

School funding is clearly a hot topic for education policy-makers, school leaders and parents. In real terms, the funding available to all schools is falling because of increased cost pressures including teacher pensions, pupil population (the same funding for more students) and the apprenticeship levy[1]. Think tanks and research bodies such as the Education Policy Institute[2] and the Institute for Fiscal Studies[3] have suggested funding levels are detrimental to quality education and will continue to negatively impact schools.

School leaders have said publicly that growing budget pressures is leaving them little option than to limit their offering to pupils or to look for funds outside of the allocated budget to make ends meet. More schools are asking parents to make financial contributions than ever before and as a consequence, mums and dads tell us that the amount they are voluntarily contributing to, for example, the school fund, is increasing year on year.

What our research shows

Our Annual Parent Surveys[4] have asked about contributions to the school fund over the last three years:

- **2 out of 5** (43%) of parents polled had been *asked* to donate to a school fund (up from 42% in 2017 and 37% in 2016)
- The proportion of parents who *donate* to the school fund is increasing but remains around a **third** at 36% (34% 2017, 29% 2016)
- An average of **£11.35** is donated each month, **an increase** of £2.45 (28%) on the 2017 figure
- Although 45% donate less than £10 per month, 29% are now giving between £10 and £30, a figure that has risen substantially from just a fifth (21%) in 2016
- **51%** in 2018 know how the donated money was spent, up from 38% in 2017 and 37% in 2016
- Around **half (49%)** of all parent respondents in 2018 believe the pressures on school budgets have **negatively impacted** on their child's education
- The cost-cutting measures considered most detrimental are schools reducing the length of the school week (84% of parents who say it's been implemented believe it to have had a negative impact), reducing the number of subjects on offer (77%), increasing class sizes (76%), cutting back on equipment (76%), reducing the number of support staff (74%) and reducing the number of supply teachers (71%).

Our 2018 survey shows that to help meet funding shortfalls, schools asked parents to pay for:

- School clubs that used to be free (26%) as well as events such as sports days and concerts (28%)
- Supply teaching equipment (21%) such as stationery, books, glue pens etc.

Furthermore, data from 2017 and 2016 found that:

- 78% think the cost of sending a child to school is increasing (up from 72% in 2016)
- 55% are concerned about the cost of sending a child to school (up from 47% in 2016)

[1] Tes February 2018 - *Apprenticeship levy to cost schools £110 million* (C. Santry)
[2] EPI March 2018 – *School funding pressures in England* (J. Andrews, T. Lawrence)
[3] IFS July 2018 - *School funding per pupil falls faster in England than in Wales* (L. Sibieta)
[4] Data from around 1,500 parents in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- Only 40% think the cost is acceptable (down from 42% in 2016).

The challenge for parents

The majority of parents (85%) feel supportive towards their child's school[5]. Within this climate, Parentkind is concerned that parents are under pressure to contribute financially to their child's education. We feel there remains a need for schools to consider the overall financial ask of parents in any school year, especially since many may already be experiencing hardship. Although the number is falling, a substantial proportion of parents continue to say that they don't know how the money they donate is spent by the school, which needs to be addressed.

Parentkind's position and next steps

Parents being asked to contribute to the school fund [6]voluntarily is not new. However, schools are being more vociferous about their financial pressures which has led to more parents donating and a dramatic increase in the amount donated. We believe parents, as both stakeholders and an integral part of the school community, should have their views heard and taken into account at all levels, from government to school leadership, on all education matters that directly impact upon them, including school funding. Although parents are unable to directly influence the government's budget for schools or the head teacher's spending plans, positive parental engagement at school level can lead to greater awareness of the challenges faced by many families in the local community, and generate solutions.

Many parents also contribute their time and skills to their child's school, which can help to alleviate some funding pressures. Our 2016 member survey revealed that PTAs collectively raise around £99 million each year and volunteer three million hours of their time to enrich our schools. However, parents have told us increasingly that PTA funds are invested in essentials rather than 'extras'. Monies raised by PTAs, as with the school fund, are channelled back into the school. To give parents more of a voice on school funding:

- Parentkind wants to see policymakers actively using evidence gathered from parents to influence all educational matters, and especially the current national debates on the levels of investment in our children's education, so that funding challenges can be viewed from the perspective of parents as well as schools.
- Parentkind would like schools to establish strategies to engage with all parents, including those who are 'harder to reach', and make a greater effort to inform and consult parents on funding pressures and their impact. School leaders should seek dialogue with a representative cross-section of parents through a parent voice group such as a PTA or parent council in order to fully understand the parent perspective and the real impact funding decisions have on the families within their school community.
- Parentkind believes that, while schools have every right to fundraise, parents who are willing and able to make a financial contribution to their child's school will find doing so via a PTA has benefits over donating to the school fund. This is because the best PTAs have a clear constitution on what they aim to do, that they seek to invest to benefit every child in the school and parents can directly influence where any funds raised are invested.

[5] Annual Parent Survey 2018, Parentkind

[6] The school fund is a voluntary scheme where parents can donate, usually by direct debit, a set amount to their child's school, where monies raised often go to benefit all pupils with enrichment opportunities that are decided autonomously by school leaders.

Parentkind is a charity which supports, enables and champions all the ways parents can participate in their child's school life and education. We are also the largest membership body for Parent Teacher Associations - our 13,700 members are found in over 50% of schools nationwide. We gather evidence through our Annual Parent Survey, as well as other research projects throughout the year. We want to share these views with education policy- and decision-makers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and invite them to engage with us in a joint effort to ensure every child is given the best opportunity to achieve their potential by parents taking an active role.

We have over 60 years' experience in supporting parents to get involved in their child's education and school life whether that is through their school Parent Teacher Association, parent council, or by engaging in learning at home and school.

Further information is available at www.parentkind.org.uk.