

## UK Cost of the School Day

The UK Cost of the School Day is a joint project between Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East. The project has been working directly in partnership with schools since the beginning of 2020 to understand how poverty has an impact on the experience that children have at school.

4.3 million children in the UK are currently growing up in poverty - in an average classroom nine children will be living in poverty and this has stark implications for schools. Many of these children are living in working households and as a result are not always eligible for free school meals. This can make it difficult for schools to identify which children and families might be struggling, meaning they don't always get the support that they need. The UK Cost of the School Day project has utilised the Poverty Proofing © approach, developed by Children North East, to work with whole school communities in England to understand some of the challenges and barriers that low-income families face within our education system. We have now spoken directly to over 4,500 children and young people, 800 parents, 400 school staff and 60 governors. Our research has shown that children in low-income families do not get equity of experience and opportunity while at school. Children have told us that there are issues within the school food system, including restrictive eligibility criteria for free school meals and issues around the handling of dinner money debt which particularly impacts those in low-income families. They have also talked about the things that they miss out in school such as fun activities like trips, fundraising events and celebrations, and that too often they face stigma from their peers and are under pressure to have the same clothing and material possessions. Listening to children and young people draws attention to the ways in which inequalities of access, opportunity and participation impact on pupils' learning and enjoyment of school.

Young people have told us about the ways in which school costs have an impact on their engagement and access to the music curriculum.

Pupils have told us that they are unable to fully engage with the music curriculum and all the opportunities on offer because instrument tuition is often considered an 'extra' and therefore only available to families at a cost. We have also seen and heard examples of good practice, with some schools funding whole class instrument tuition. However when this provision ends, instrument tuition again becomes something only available to families who can afford the associated costs. It's not just the cost of tuition itself that presents problems for lower income families. Parents are also expected to purchase or hire an instrument so that children can practice outside of their dedicated lesson time. We know many schools provide instruments to pupils for use in class lesson time, where lessons are being funded by the school as part of the curriculum. However, the research shows that those children who have instruments available at home are able to practice more, and progress faster in comparison to their peers who cannot afford to purchase an instrument. Quotes from young people and families demonstrate clearly that young people are missing out on music education because of cost:

**"My child was interested in music lessons but a group lesson lasting 15 minutes per week for a term costs over £50." (Parent)**

**"I want to learn guitar in this school but I can't because my mum has a little bit of money." (Year 2 pupil)**

**"I used to do drum kit, but I quit cos it's too expensive. I felt quite sad because I liked doing the drums and it was a bit sad that I had to stop." (Year 6 pupil)**

**“I was going to sign up for music lessons, and for guitar it was £5 or £10 a week....I was speaking to mum, but my mum says no, she said she only bought the guitar for fun and it costs a bit too much each week” (Pupil)**

The consequences of music related costs can be stark. Students from low income households that do opt to take music at GCSE but cannot afford instrument tuition miss out on developing the practical and performance skills needed for the performance element of examinations. Students without instruments and instrument tuition also miss out on extra-curricular opportunities such as taking part in school productions, plays, orchestras and musicals. Finally, there is evidence from our research with students that cost is a factor students take in to consideration when choosing their GCSE options, and some may have to decide not to pursue music for this reason. The feedback we have had from children and young people in relation to music education supports data analysis on attainment and take-up of music in schools. The Education Policy Institute labelled music as one of the least ‘egalitarian subjects’ with music listed as having one the largest participation and attainment gaps. Pupils in receipt of free school meals are 39% less likely to take music at GCSE than their peers and when those in low-income families do take music as a GCSE option, they get on average 1.4 grades less than their non-free school meal counterparts.<sup>i</sup>

Schools alone cannot solve poverty in England. However, with a much more detailed consideration and exploration of what school feels and looks like through the eyes of a child growing up in poverty, there are a number of practical steps that can be taken by schools to remove costs and make the school day more inclusive for students in low income households. In relation to music education, schools should seek to monitor take-up of opportunities in music to ensure that pupils don’t miss out. Schools should also explore universal music provision for all pupils, particularly those with no recourse to public funds and those not eligible for free school meal who often miss out on targeted interventions such as subsidised or free instrument tuition.

As well as recommendations for schools, there is a clear role for policymakers in addressing school costs. We are calling on the UK government to first and foremost recognise the impact that school-related costs have on children’s ability to learn, and their access to music education. We also recommend a review of charging guidance which currently permits charging for instrument tuition, despite it being needed as part of the music curriculum at secondary level. This is creating disparity within schools, a place which should support levelling-up and opportunities for all. Finally, we are also advocating for increased investment in schools to ensure that pupils have access to a truly free and inclusive school day.

Full report and findings is available here: [The Cost of the School Day in England: Pupils' Perspectives | CPAG](#)

For more information on the UK Cost of the School Day project please do email [UKCoSD@CPAG.org.uk](mailto:UKCoSD@CPAG.org.uk).

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<sup>i</sup> [Covid-19 and Disadvantage gaps in England 2020](#), Education Policy Institute, February 2022