# Financial barriers cause one in six UK pupils to miss school, with uniforms a major issue in Scotland



A recent report has brought to light the troubling issue of school attendance being hindered by financial barriers across the UK, with particular attention on the distinct circumstances in Scotland. Released by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), the report titled "Priced Out of School: How Lack of Money Prevents Young People from Attending School," reveals that one in six pupils miss school due to financial issues, significantly impacting their educational experience and wellbeing. This survey, encompassing 1,701 students aged between eleven and eighteen, underscores the multifaceted challenges that families face, particularly regarding school uniforms, food, transport, and extracurricular activities.

The CPAG's findings indicate a stark contrast in the effects of transport costs on school attendance between England, Wales, and Scotland. In England and Wales, nearly a third of students missing school attributed their absence to transport expenses; intriguingly, in Scotland, this figure drops to thirteen percent. While recent Scottish Government policies have acknowledged and sought to address some of these financial pressures, the report emphasizes that substantial barriers remain, particularly in relation to school uniforms. A significant 48% of young people who missed school for financial reasons cited not having the appropriate uniform or kit as a critical issue. The challenge is further exacerbated by the prevalence of branded uniforms, although Scottish Government guidance discourages schools from enforcing costly uniforms as compulsory.

Moreover, school trips have emerged as another financial hurdle for families, with students commenting on the exorbitant costs associated with educational outings. For example, a secondary student reported saving for a history trip priced at £550, which is indicative of the broader trend of schools passing on substantial costs to families. Such financial burdens translate into missed learning opportunities, which can impact academic performance and mental health, issues well documented in various studies highlighting the correlation between poverty and educational outcomes.

In light of these challenges, the CPAG has made compelling recommendations. They advocate for the UK government to abolish the two-child limit and the benefit cap, measures which could alleviate some of the financial strain on families. Additionally, the organisation calls for enhanced access to free school meals, increased support for uniform costs, and the introduction of free public transport for all youth—a model already in place in Scotland, which has proved helpful in reducing transport-related absences.

Experts like Kate Anstey, CPAG’s head of education, assert that children living in poverty suffer significantly at school, noting that many lack the means to participate fully in school activities. Anstey has highlighted the crucial need for government action to support family living standards, urging for solutions that can ensure children are not sidelined in their educational journeys.

John Dickie, the Director of CPAG in Scotland, echoed these sentiments, pointing to the significant impacts that school-related costs have on attendance and, ultimately, on children's education. He stressed the importance of concerted efforts from schools, councils, and governments to recognise and tackle these financial barriers, which remain a hindrance to equitable access to education.

The Scottish Government has acknowledged the need for ongoing improvements and has announced plans to increase funding for essential school-related support. Providing £14.2 million for School Clothing Grants by 2025-26 and expanding free school meals to more pupils, the government aims to remove some of the financial barriers that prevent children from getting the education they deserve.

As discussions on educational accessibility continue, the intersection of poverty and educational attainment remains a pressing concern. With significant disparities still evident, particularly for low-income families—whose children are twice as likely to miss school compared to their wealthier counterparts—more comprehensive strategies are necessary to level the educational playing field. Collaborative efforts and innovative policies will be critical in ensuring that every child has equal access to quality education, regardless of their family’s financial circumstances.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25197796.one-six-pupils-miss-school-lack-money/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/low-income-pupils-twice-likely-miss-school)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25197796.one-six-pupils-miss-school-lack-money/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/f587b776-f09c-4fa9-b723-323594d6eb73), [[7]](https://childreninscotland.org.uk/education-costs-families-hundreds-per-year-study-finds/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/22219fc0-305a-4924-949a-5b6c6f8d99aa), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/28/covid-poverty-pupil-absence-england-schools-social-economic-pandemic-families)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25197796.one-six-pupils-miss-school-lack-money/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/f587b776-f09c-4fa9-b723-323594d6eb73), [[7]](https://childreninscotland.org.uk/education-costs-families-hundreds-per-year-study-finds/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25197796.one-six-pupils-miss-school-lack-money/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/low-income-pupils-twice-likely-miss-school)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25197796.one-six-pupils-miss-school-lack-money/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/low-income-pupils-twice-likely-miss-school), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/28/covid-poverty-pupil-absence-england-schools-social-economic-pandemic-families)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25197796.one-six-pupils-miss-school-lack-money/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/f587b776-f09c-4fa9-b723-323594d6eb73)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25197796.one-six-pupils-miss-school-lack-money/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/f587b776-f09c-4fa9-b723-323594d6eb73> - This article discusses the implementation of free breakfast clubs in primary schools across the UK, aiming to improve attendance and focus among students. The initiative, backed by a £33 million budget, seeks to address the high absenteeism rate, where one in five children regularly miss school. By providing a nutritious start to the day, these clubs aim to reduce barriers to education, assist parents with childcare, and strengthen teacher-student relationships. Studies show these clubs lead to improved academic performance, particularly beneficial for the 4.3 million children in poverty.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/22219fc0-305a-4924-949a-5b6c6f8d99aa> - This article examines the increasing trend of parents taking their children on holidays during term time, leading to a significant portion of unauthorised absences. Motivations include cost savings on travel and visiting extended families. Despite government measures like increased fines and mandatory attendance reporting, the effectiveness of these policies remains debated. Research indicates that absences lower academic performance, with lasting effects on earnings and achievement levels. Suggested solutions range from raising fines to staggering school holidays, though the success of these measures is uncertain.
4. <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/low-income-pupils-twice-likely-miss-school> - An analysis of Department for Education attendance data reveals a significant gap between low-income and wealthier secondary school pupils. In 2022-23, 14.4% of poorer secondary pupils missed school, compared to 7.3% of their more affluent peers. Additionally, 45% of poorer secondary pupils were persistently absent, compared to 20.2% of wealthier peers. The article highlights the need for increased investment in schools serving disadvantaged communities to address these disparities.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/ecefe39b-f0df-4547-b4b1-4d86f0f77d05> - This article discusses the impact of a 20% VAT on private school fees, effective January 2025, aiming to raise £1.5 billion for state schools. The new tax has provoked backlash from parents and private schools fearing unaffordable fees. An estimated 3,000 pupils will transfer to state schools mid-year. Financial advisors are suggesting strategies like trusts or seeking help from grandparents to cover fee increases. The Independent Schools Council is pursuing legal action against the government, predicting a long-term exodus of 37,000 students from private schools.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/28/covid-poverty-pupil-absence-england-schools-social-economic-pandemic-families> - This article explores the rising pupil absence rates in England, attributing the increase to factors such as poor mental health, poverty, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Councils report that increased anxiety and lack of mental health support are driving a steep rise in pupils missing school, with some children struggling to leave home at all. The article highlights the need for comprehensive support systems to address these challenges and improve school attendance.
7. <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/education-costs-families-hundreds-per-year-study-finds/> - This article reports on research from the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) indicating that families in the UK spend hundreds of pounds annually on essential education costs, including uniforms, learning materials, school trips, packed lunches, and transport. The study highlights the financial burden on families and calls for increased support to ensure all children can participate fully in education without financial barriers.