

# The unfair cost of u

As superstores such as Asda and Tesco have started selling school clothes, the cost has plummeted in recent years, yet some parents are still paying over the odds

**J**ane Pratt recalls her first day at school well. Her parents couldn't afford the uniform, so she went in her old school's clothes. The looks from other pupils are something she didn't want her children to experience.

Now, with her two sons going to junior school, she finds herself in a dilemma. While she can just about afford to buy the compulsory items, she objects to the high prices. For example, a polo shirt costs £8 at the school shop, yet she could buy a similar one at a supermarket for £1.50. She calculates it costs her more than £100 a year for the uniforms (see her story, below).

Like most state schools in Britain, Jane's sons' school specifies that pupils should wear a uniform, but many schools restrict where parents can buy that uniform – either from a specialist or the school shop.

Guidelines from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) say that the school governing bodies, which decide on uniform

policy, should 'give high priority to cost considerations', but there seems to be little sign that schools are easing the burden on parents. In a recent review of school uniform costs, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) called these restrictions 'a tax on parents'. The OFT found that each school, on average, has three compulsory uniform items and calculated that restrictive selling was costing parents an extra £45m a year.

## Supermarket response

The review was prompted by a halving in high-street prices for uniform items in recent years. It can now cost just £11 for a basic outfit of jumper, shirt and trousers.

Prices at stores such as Asda, Matalan, Tesco and Woolworths are in stark contrast to specialists, where a blazer can cost £50 and trousers around £30. Asda's 'Shop 'em to Stop 'em' campaign last summer called on parents to expose schools which dictate where they must buy uniforms.

'Customers have told us that it's unfair that, in some cases, they are being forced to pay over the odds,' said Angela Spindler of George Global, which supplies Asda.

The store claimed that uniforms from specialists were overpriced and no better in quality than supermarket brands. In a Which? test of various uniforms from specialists against their high-street equivalents, we also found little difference in quality (see 'High street vs specialists', opposite).

But Donald Moore from the Schoolwear Association, which represents specialist outfitters, felt that the OFT has failed to compare like with like. He argues that price variations are caused by schools' insistence on the personalisation of uniforms.

'We've seen a move back to blazers in recent years. Schools want to improve their

**It can now cost just £11 for a basic outfit of jumper, shirt and trousers**

## 'UNIFORMS SHOULD BE AVAILABLE AT A RANGE OF SHOPS'

### Jane Pratt 50, housewife

Jane is unhappy that parents at her two sons' (James, pictured right and Edward, far right) school, New Haw Community Junior in Surrey, are forced to buy items with the school logo on them directly from the school. It's emphasised to parents that these are required and Jane said that pupils are reminded about this at assembly.

'Uniforms should be available at a range of shops,' says Jane. She also suggested that the school allow parents to put badges, costing

between 50p and £1, on the clothes. The school rejected the idea.

However, headteacher Marie Cahill said there were no compulsory items and there had been few complaints about the cost. 'We encourage children to wear it and we make it clear to parents before they join the school,' she said.

The parent committee had rejected the idea of a badge as it thought that no one would want to sew it on. 'If that happened we would lose our uniform altogether,' Mrs Cahill added.

### Jane's annual spend on essential items per child and supermarket equivalent

#### NEW HAW COMMUNITY SCHOOL

<b>Sweatshirt</b>	£10.00 x 2 =	£20
<b>Polo shirt</b>	£8.00 x 5 =	£40
<b>PE shirt</b>	£7.50 =	£7.50
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>£67.50</b>

#### SUPERMARKET EQUIVALENT

<b>Sweatshirt</b>	£2.25 x 2 =	£4.50
<b>Polo shirt</b>	£1.50 x 5 =	£7.50
<b>PE shirt</b>	£1.00 =	£1.00
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>£13.00</b>



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## STATE EDUCATION, PRIVATE PRICES



**Melanie Tudehope 44,**  
*driving instructor*

Melanie's 14-year-old daughter Rebecca (far left) attends Tiffin Girls School, in Kingston-upon-Thames, where more than ten items are compulsory. Her other daughter Isobel (left), aged 11, goes to nearby Holy Cross School where uniforms, including a £45 tartan skirt,

have to be bought from a designated outfitter.

Melanie told us: 'We can't afford private education. That's why we chose a state school, but by the time you've bought everything it costs more than £200.'

Tom Gibbons, headteacher of Holy Cross, told us: 'We are aware of the cost and are meeting suppliers to ensure that we can give the best value to our families.'

brand and look smarter,' he said. He pointed out that uniforms from specialist stores were manufactured in the UK unlike imported items in the supermarkets. 'I think schools and parents should think about where their uniform comes from.'

### Private practices

The OFT report featured only state schools, but parents at private schools are likely to face even higher bills. Liza Derbyshire estimates she spent about £600 just kitting out her two daughters, Lucie and Leah, last autumn. That includes buying jumpers for £28 and blazers for £75 each.

They both attend Bury Grammar School, whose compulsory uniform can be purchased only from the Monkhouse store in Bury. Managing Director Peter Monkhouse said its pricing reflected the school's specific requirements: 'We are not trying to rip people off. If we are asked to supply a purple jumper with a badge, we have to stock every size and make it available all year round. The supermarkets won't do that.'

### Taking action

While all parents are concerned about unnecessary costs, the issue for low-income families is even more serious. Children may be targeted by bullies for not wearing the

**Children may be targeted by bullies for not wearing the correct uniform**

## High street vs specialists

We reveal how the cheaper brands compare with their more costly rivals

We took four items of school clothing bought from specialist outfitters and school shops and put them up against their cheaper high-street equivalents. We tested each item for wear and tear as well as for shrinkage after washing. In three out of four of our comparative tests, we found the material used was similar and there was little or no difference between the garments after testing. In each case, all garments also kept their colour after washing.

A white polo shirt from Asda (£1.50) performed just as well in tests as the New Haw Community Junior School white polo shirt (£8). We found hardly any difference between the Bury Catholic Prep School's blue polo shirt (£8.50) and one for £3.50 from the National Schoolwear

Centre. The same was true of Bury Grammar School Girls' white blouse (£14) compared with one for £5 from Marks & Spencer. A green sweatshirt from the National Schoolwear Centre (£7.99) was almost as durable as one from Holy Cross School (£18) – although, in this instance, our expert thought that the seams and fabric were not as good on the cheaper version.



correct uniform and, in the worst cases, parents might be put off sending their child to a school with expensive uniforms.

Citizens Advice Chief Executive David Harker commented: 'The DfES needs to tackle schools that are ignoring the guidelines on making uniforms affordable.'

In response to the OFT review, the DfES is revising its guidance and will urge schools to make uniforms more widely available from a greater range of outlets

rather than an expensive sole supplier and to help low-income families with grants.

As yet, however, there have been no solid moves to change the existing restrictive practice and the government's mooted proposals still give schools freedom to decide on choice of uniform and where it is sold. Only government intervention will stop individual schools from using sole suppliers and give parents the option of attaching badges to high-street garments.

## Checklist

How parents and schools can work together to keep costs down

### ■ Swap shop

Parents can run or encourage regular second-hand sales or swapping events.

### ■ Get advice

Charities, such as the Family Welfare Association, run schemes. Also contact your local education authority for help.

■ **Parent power** Put pressure on schools to

sell badges separately to attach to uniforms; to sell new items at cost price; and to provide a list of shops where parents can buy cheaper alternatives to compulsory items.

■ **School aid** At Halifax High School in West Yorkshire, real efforts have been made to keep costs down. There's

just one compulsory item, a school jumper, and ties are issued free. The school decided against a unique blazer with a badge and opted for a plain black one that parents can buy on the high street. Deputy head Marilyn Collins said: 'We were mindful of costs for low-income parents.'