

SPC Community Bulletin

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The Cost of School Supplies: A Challenge for Many Families

The Social Planning Council of Ottawa (SPC) is working on a social inclusion project for families with children under 6 called "Kids and Community". Our goal is to improve inclusion in early learning, healthy development and the transition to school. We are working with low income families, Aboriginal families, families of diverse backgrounds, and families where a parent is Deaf or has a disability. In partnership with parents and organizations in Ottawa and with the Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network, we are building parent-community partnerships and encouraging policy and program improvements to increase inclusion for all families. The Ottawa "Kids and Community" project is one part of a larger project led by the Social Planning Network of Ontario www.spno.ca.

This is the second of four information bulletins on inclusion issues identified by parents in the project. 200 parents in 23 focus groups told us what was working well and what was getting in the way of their role of supporting their children's early learning and transition into school. This bulletin examines the challenge of school supplies and identifies what steps we can each take to improve the situation.

What We Heard

Parents in the Kids and Community focus groups were very concerned about the increasing costs to send their children to school. Low income parents shared the tremendous hardship these expenses created, particularly in September. For many low income parents, the cost of school supplies and school fees meant they did not have enough money for other basic needs such as food. Many parents were concerned that children from low to modest income families were sometimes made to feel inferior, if their supplies were not the most expensive. Even many parents who were not living on low incomes were concerned about the growing costs to their family as well as disparities between schools.

"The school fees are too much, especially if you have many children"

"At the beginning of the school year, you get a list of supplies needed and it specifies that you need brand name products not "No Name", and then an additional \$20 cash! At some schools they send it back home if it's not the right brand. Or else the other kids will treat your kids differently."

"It seems straight forward to me. A parent shouldn't have to choose between having enough for food or having enough for the children to go to school."

What Parents Said in the Focus Groups

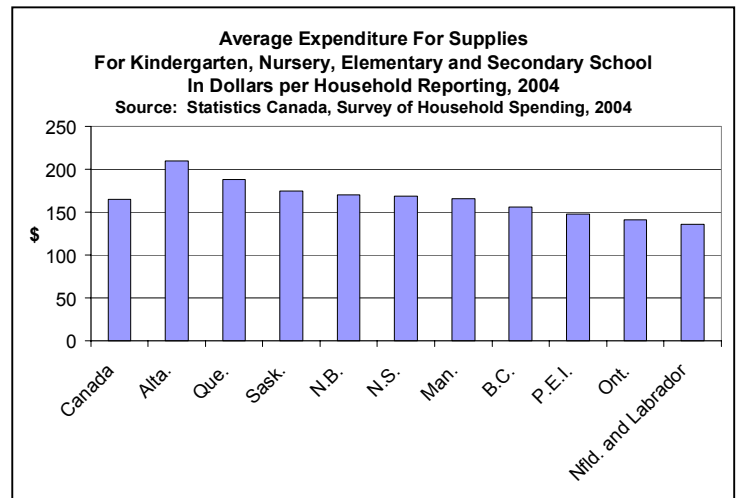
How Much Are School Supplies?

The cost and range of school supplies varies across each province, school board, school and grade level. Parents can pay anywhere from \$0.00 to several hundred dollars for school supplies. In general, school supplies are more expensive for secondary school children than for elementary school children. However, a quick scan of the websites of the Ottawa school boards reveals that many of the schools have a list of necessary supplies even for children in kindergarten. The most common items required across grades can include pencils, pens, erasers, markers, rulers, glue sticks, scissors, crayons, tape, extra shoes (for gym only), Kleenex, workbooks, binders, refill paper, dividers, duotangs, tennis balls (for the bottom of chair legs), highlighters, resealable bags, earphones, board games, dictionary, Bescherelle, geometry set, various presentation folders, liquid paper, combination lock, bottled water and calculator. Additional supplies can be required for classes such as art, shop or music. As well, parents are often charged for additional supplies which must be purchased through the school, including agenda books, resource materials, craft materials, course workbooks, etc. A random check of the Information on the websites of several Ottawa boards showed a range for this additional cost for supplies - paid directly to the schools – ranging between \$15.00 and \$52.50 for primary grades.

Spending on School Supplies Across Canada

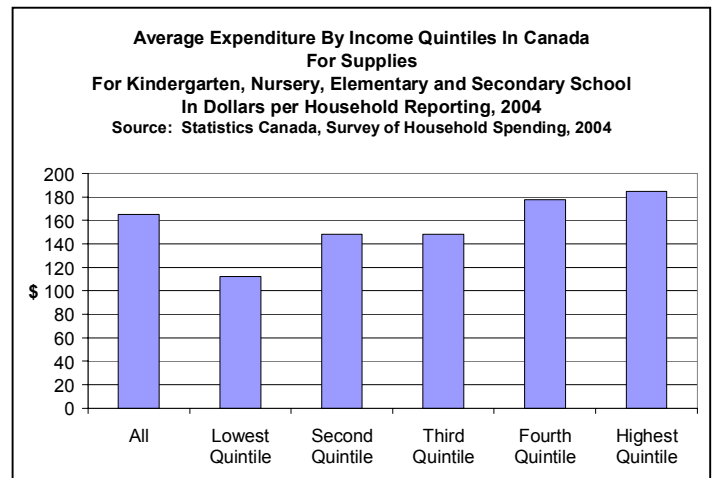
Each year, Statistics Canada's Survey of Household Spending collects information on how much households spend on school supplies.³ In 2004, on average, households in Canada spent \$165.00 for supplies for kindergarten, nursery, elementary and secondary school. As we see from the following chart, average spending was highest in Alberta (\$210.00) and lowest in Newfoundland and Labrador (\$136.00). In 2004, Ontario households spent, on average \$141.00.

³ All data quoted in this bulletin is from Statistics Canada Survey of Household Spending (2004) and reflects figures for households who reported spending on the item.

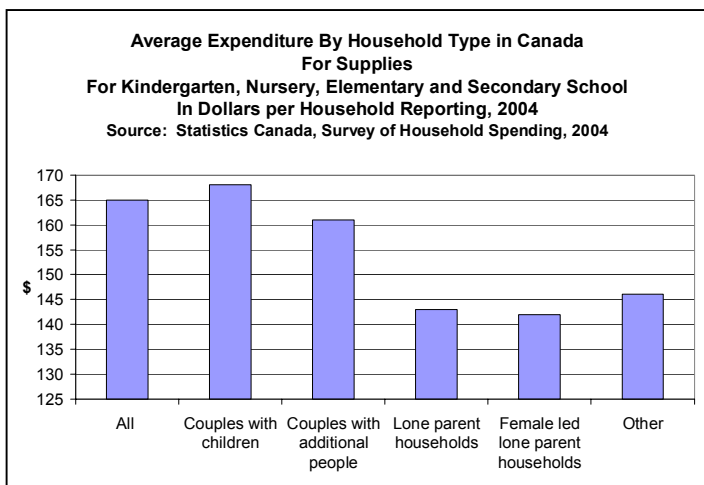


Who's Affected by the Costs of School Supplies?

All families are affected by the increasing demands to buy school supplies. As we see from the chart on the next page, and as we might expect, families within the highest income quintiles spent the most on school supplies in 2004 (an average of \$185.00 across Canada). Families across Canada from the lowest income quintile spent an average of \$112.00 in 2004. This reflects several factors, including expectations of different schools and personal choices of the families. However, the difference in average expenditures between the lowest and the highest income quintiles is only \$73.00, while the difference in average annual income between these two groups is \$128,273! Low and moderate income families have much less disposable income to cover these costs.



Between different types of families there are also different average expenditures. Across Canada, couple families with children spent the most on average (\$168.00) while female led lone parent households spent the least on average (\$142.00). Lone parent families are normally one income families, and have less disposable income on average than couple families.



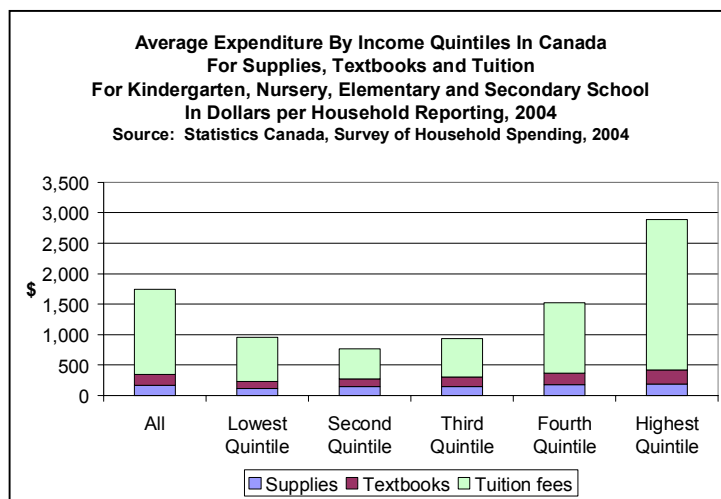
The cost of school supplies also affects staff within the school system. There is no consistent data on how much staff are spending from their own pockets. However, there is a growing body of anecdotal evidence that many concerned and committed staff are paying significant amounts from their own pockets to help families in their school community.

In recent years the voluntary sector has also responded to the challenge of school supply costs. Some school boards have charitable arms which raise funds to purchase supplies which are provided to the students (e.g. the Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l'Est ontarien). Several charities or voluntary sector groups provide school supplies to low income households. For example, in 2005 Ami-Jeunesse in Ottawa provided 1,263 children with backpacks and supplies, and Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa provided similar services to 1,200 children. In 2007 the Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Group will provide 1,200 vouchers for backpacks filled with school supplies to low income families in their county

These programs, and others like them across the country, face constant challenges to meet the needs. Among other revenue sources, they rely on donations from the public, directly or through programs such as the donation program sponsored by Staples Canada.

Part of a Larger Trend

The growing challenge of school supplies is part of a larger trend of growing costs overall to attend public education at the elementary and secondary level. Parents across Canada are increasingly faced with additional school fees for textbooks and tuition, even within the public school system. This trend is examined in the next information bulletin within this series. However, it is important to understand the affordability of school supplies within the larger context. As the chart below shows, on average, in 2004 households in Canada paid \$1,740 for the costs of sending their children to kindergarten, nursery, elementary and secondary school. As one would expect, households in the highest income quintile spent the most overall (an average of \$2,891 in 2004). This would include costs for private schools. It is disturbing that the costs for households in the lowest quintile were \$951 on average in 2004 (55% of the costs incurred by the highest quintile on average). This highlights the difficulty for low income families to afford the costs of school supplies, as one component of the cost of educating their children.



What You Can Do To Help

1. Support charitable programs which provide school supplies for free or at low cost to low income families. You can identify them through your local Community Information Service or you can support them through donation bins at Staples stores across Canada.
2. Work with others in your school community, the local business community, the voluntary sector and the local neighbourhood, on projects which will increase inclusion in your local schools, particularly schools in more vulnerable neighbourhoods.
3. Inform yourself about education funding formulas and policies regarding school fees at your local school Board and your Ministry of Education. Contact your school trustee or member of Provincial Parliament to discuss your suggestions.
4. To find out more about these and related issues, we suggest the following websites:
 - Social Planning Council of Ottawa (school fees, inclusion, poverty) www.spcottawa.on.ca
 - Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network (poverty) www.renfrewcountychildpovertynetwork.org
 - Social Planning Network of Ontario (inclusion, education, social issues) www.spno.ca
 - Child and Youth Health Network for Eastern Ontario (child poverty)
www.child-youth-health.net/research_and_pub.htm
 - People for Education (education policy, funding, school fees and fundraising)
www.peopleforeducation.com
 - Canadian School Boards Association (role of schools regarding poverty / inclusion)
<http://www.cdnsba.org/publications/publications.php>

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The SPC is an independent, non-profit charity working with the community for over 75 years to address social issues and improve quality of life in Ottawa. We are a unique one-stop resource for independent social research, community based planning, and community development support for individuals, organizations and networks creating positive change. The Social Planning Council of Ottawa is a United Way funded agency.

280 Metcalfe Street, Suite 501, Ottawa, Ont. K2P 1R7. 613-236-9300. office@spcottawa.on.ca.
Visit our website at www.spcottawa.on.ca.