

**Parents count cost of back to school blues** - Sunday Star Times, 10 January 2009

About 60,000 students are starting secondary school this year meaning big bills for parents, who will be forking out for everything from new uniforms and stationery to subject fees and school sports costs.

Parents will also be asked to pay a school donation and perhaps make a contribution to the PTA.

Although the donations are by law voluntary, Raewyn Fox, CEO of the NZ Federation of Family Budgeting Services, says many families feel obliged to pay.

"When their first child starts college, families are possibly not aware of exactly what it is going to cost," says Fox. "It comes as a bit of a shock."

She says although it can be embarrassing, parents should front up to the school as early as possible to talk about payment options.

So just how much should parents be saving? We took a snapshot of donations and uniform price lists at secondary schools in Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.

Total costs will vary wildly according to subject choice, whether you buy uniforms new or second-hand, and of course whether you pay the donation. But we worked out that if you buy a new uniform and basic stationery, pay some subject fees and the donation, it will cost about \$800 for one child to start school.

Donations range from just \$75 at Dunedin's Bayfield High School, to \$200 at Green Bay High School in Auckland. (That compares to higher-decile schools such as Wellington College, asking \$575 this year, or Macleans College in Auckland, asking \$460).

Morag Hutchinson, principal of Green Bay, says not all parents pay the donation as the school makes it clear it is not compulsory.

However, she points out that on top of the donation, state schools charge compulsory costs.

"Parents must pay various sums for subject fees for take-home materials or any extra-curricular activity costs, NZQA exam costs, and so on. So it is not a free education system at all. Parents and school boards are facing significant costs all round."

For example, last year Green Bay parents were asked to pay \$9 if their child entered maths competitions, a gold coin donation to attend performances, \$10 for a ticket to the junior social, \$10 for an ID card and the yearbook (if a donation was not paid), and \$30 for tickets to the sports and graduation dinners.

End-of-year visits to hot pools or Rainbow's End cost \$25 and \$35.

At all schools, sports costs vary from about \$15 per season for cricket and soccer, to \$65 for basketball, waterpolo and premier-level hockey. Music lessons also vary depending on the instrument and how many students are taught at a time, but expect to pay between \$15 and \$30 per lesson.

Schools will also pass on the NZQA exam fees of \$75 to parents and may charge a fee if contractors are offering special exam preparation tutorials.

But uniform can be the biggest financial hurdle for parents.

We have compared the prices of the minimum uniform that a medium-sized Year 9 girl would need to start school in February.

That means one change of basic summer uniform, plus PE gear and a raincoat. Formal wear (such as blazers and ties) could cost a further \$150 to \$200 and footwear will be anything from \$20 to about \$150, depending on where parents shop.

Then there's the multitude of extras regulation socks, sunhats, beanies, scarves, umbrellas, polar fleeces and tracksuits that some schools expect students to have.

We did not compare stationery prices because they vary according to subject choice, rather than between schools, but expect to pay about \$80 to \$100 for the basics.

We chose the schools by searching each city on the [www.tki.org.nz](http://www.tki.org.nz) website, and picking the first decile eight, co-educational, state secondary school on the list. No schools in Wellington matched all of the criteria so we made an exception for single-sex school Wellington East Girls' College.