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Principals told to ease off parents over money

Sun Herald, Sydney

Page 1 of 2

PUBLIC EDUCATION

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EXCLUSIVE

Mary Ward

The state's education boss has put public school principals on notice, telling them to stop slugging parents for school supplies as cost-of-living pressures hit families.

NSW Education Secretary Murat Dizdar urged principals in an email last week to be mindful of their language when requesting financial contributions ahead of the start of term.

Premier Chris Minns backed Dizdar's call to not place extra financial pressure on families in a time where "every dollar counts".

NSW public schools ask parents to make a voluntary school contribution at the start of a new year. Some schools, particularly high schools, also request subject-specific payments as well as cash for technology and building funds.

Didzar told principals in his email they must not use terms that imply school contributions are mandatory, such as "fee", "charge" or "levy" and schools must not provide incentives or consequences for payment.

He also reinforced that every student must have access to the total school curriculum, regardless of ability to pay subject contributions.

"When many families are experiencing cost-of-living pressures, it is important that we are clear with our community that financial contributions are voluntary," Dizdar said.

The secretary asked schools to refrain from asking families for classroom supplies such as tissues, wet wipes and whiteboard markers. While some schools use voluntary contributions to fund these items, as well as student stationery, others ask families to provide supplies.

"Our preference has always been that schools provide this through their total budget," Dizdar wrote.

Minns said it was important no family felt cost was a barrier to their child's public education.

"We know that the voluntary contribution is important to our schools, but in a time when every dollar counts, it is important the families of NSW know that there is no obligation to contribute," he said.

Social services have raised concerns about financial pressures on families returning children to

school, after NSW Labor announced it would not continue the previous government's back-to-school
Continued Page 4



21 JAN, 2024

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Page 2 of 2

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From Page 1

voucher scheme. Voluntary school contribution rates in 2024 remain notionally capped at \$110 for secondary students and \$51 for primary students, although many schools ask for a higher amount.

The Sun-Herald has seen several back-to-school lists from Sydney public schools which request parents to purchase classroom items. Responsibility for the supplies is often divided across a year group.

Schools that have previously asked for amounts beyond the cap have been directed by the department not to increase those amounts beyond what they have previously asked for.

In 2022, some schools raised hundreds of thousands of dollars through contributions from parents.

Parents at Sydney Boys High contributed more than any other school, donating a total of \$1,038,474.50. This year, the selective school will ask for donations upwards of \$2600 per student, including a \$1180 voluntary contribution, a \$345 technology levy and \$695 for its building fund.

The primary school with the highest contributions was Balgowlah Heights Public, on Sydney's northern beaches, where the parents donated \$489,314.

Its P&C previously told the *Herald* that parents were sent two \$450 contribution requests annually, paying for activities such as music and physical education, a \$100 contribution to the P&C and an \$80 technology levy.

In contrast, more than 350 schools in the state collected less than \$1000 in total parent contributions in 2022. Data for 2023 will be released by the department later this year.

NSW Secondary Principals' Council president Craig Petersen said voluntary contributions were necessary for schools to make up funding shortfalls,

but was a tough balance for principals.

"It's a real dilemma for schools because you want to supplement your educational programs. How do you encourage parents to pay the fees, but at the same time be offering free public education?" he said.

He said the amounts requested were usually driven by parents' capacity to pay, expressing concern that this perpetuated inequality. "In some places, the parents are almost demanding these additional things... but in other communities parents might have no capacity to pay for that," he said.

Petersen said individual subject payments enabled schools to use more expensive supplies, particularly in design and technology subjects. He said no child would be turned away from a subject.

"The problem becomes, of course, that parents need to go through a process [to have the fee waived], and some people are too embarrassed," he said.



**NSW Education
Secretary Murat
Dizdar.**