

Parental Informal Payments in Education Study: Slovakia

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Abstract

It is a constitutional right of all primary and secondary school pupils in Slovakia that they have access to cost-free education in public schools. However, informal parental payments, i.e. those that parents pay to school or its representatives, mostly in cash and without an income receipt, are widespread at all levels of education. Almost all parents make a cash contribution once or twice a year to a parental association; they claim receiving little information on what purposes the funds were spent. Between 70 and 90% of parents help pay for various school events, extracurricular activities and also textbooks, even though according to current legislation free textbooks should be available. When payments are collected from pupils by their teachers it poses an additional problem: low-income families frequently cannot pay all the contributions expected and are stigmatised twice. First when their children are excluded from activities which require a contribution (e.g. school trips); and second, their children have to cope with pressure from teachers or fellow pupils when contributions are collected openly in the classroom and all can see that they cannot pay.

The main recommendations concerning the problem of informal payments in the Slovak education system are (1) to explain to school management the distinction between legal and illegal collection of parental payments and provide them with a sample model of transparent and fair collection of parental payments, (2) to formalize the receipt of payments at schools: the payments received by schools should be properly recorded to prevent possible misuse/embezzlement of funds and non-cash collection should be preferred, (3) to exclude teachers and pupils from the process of collection of informal payment: another school official (non-pedagogical) should be responsible for the collection of these funds to eliminate possible pressure on children/parents when their own teachers also act as collectors of these payments, especially if parents are unable/unwilling to make some of them and (4) to abolish direct marketing of commercial products by external dealers or teachers to children at schools.

1. Introduction

It is a constitutional right of all primary and secondary school pupils in Slovakia that they have access to cost-free education in public schools. Almost three quarters of

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Dates of study: January – September 2007

Slovaks complete at least secondary education.² With the schools financing reform in 2003, per-student funding was introduced. Public schools of the same type were equalized in terms of funds they receive per student. Private and church schools became eligible to receive public subsidies per student at the same level. Schools now receive money according to the number of students that enrol in them, and this has increased competition among schools, and has made them actively look for students and offer attractive educational options.

Still, parents say that when September comes, school-related expenses become burdensome. These include school aids such as stationary, school bags, as well as school meals and travel costs. These payments are paid directly to the respective providers – be it shops, school catering facilities and public or private transport companies. But there are also less visible and less controlled funds – referred to as informal payments in this study. These are payments which parents pay to a school, its representatives or organizations related to the school for various purposes and for which they do not receive any income receipt.

Almost all parents make a cash contribution once or twice a year to a parental association; they receive little information on what purposes the funds were spent. Between 70 and 90% of parents help pay for various school events, extracurricular activities and also textbooks, even though according to current legislation textbooks should be available free of charge. When payments are collected from pupils by their teachers it poses an additional problem. According to our focus groups outside Bratislava, low-income families frequently cannot pay all the contributions expected. These families are stigmatised twice. The first occurs when their children are excluded from activities which require a contribution (e.g. school trips); and second, they are stigmatized by having their children cope with pressure from teachers or fellow pupils when contributions are collected openly in the classroom and all can see that they cannot pay.

Parents, teachers and principals all claim that public schools are underfunded and that is why informal parental payments exist. As one of the parents attending the focus groups said: “education matters are simple – what the state does not finance, parents will pay for.” Though not happy with such arrangement – only half admit paying informal payments voluntarily – parents do little to change the current state of affairs. So far it seems that parental payments are a deeply rooted tradition that almost no parent dares to confront.

Box 1. Socio-economic Data (The World Bank, CIA)

Currency: koruna, SKK per USD – 24.919 (2007)

GDP (USD billions): 1996 – 21.4, 2005 – 47.4, 2006 – 55.0

GDP annual growth: 2005 – 6.0 2006 – 8.3

² Among 29 to 59 olds, 70% acquires ISCED 3 and 12% ISCED 5 to 7 level of education. Data for the educational attainment of population in 1997; Source: Key data on vocational training in Europe – The transition from education to working life, European Commission and Cedefop, 2001.

GNI per capita (USD): 1995 – 3310, 2000 – 3860, 2006 – 9610

Population below poverty line: 21% (2002)

Unemployment, total (% of total labor force): 2005 – 16.2

Public education spending (% of GDP): 1995 – 4.8, 2000 – 3.9, 2006 - 3.9

Expenditure per student, primary (% of GDP per capita): 2004 – 11.9

Ratio of pupils to teacher (primary level): 2006 – 17.2

Ratio of pupils to teacher (secondary level): 2006 – 12.8

Sources: The World Bank, <http://go.worldbank.org/LJW2UB0SI0>;

CIA The World Factbook (on currency and poverty line), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>

2. The Context: Slovak Education in Transition

During the 20th century, the Slovak education system experienced three waves of rapid development (Průcha, 1999). The first wave (1918-1938) was characterized by introduction of eight-year compulsory school attendance, formation of a network of grammar schools and specialized secondary schools, and establishment of the Comenius University in Bratislava in 1919. This wave began when Slovakia joined the Czech Republic to create a single state in 1918 and lasted until 1938. The second wave began in the 1950s, when efforts were made to upgrade the system to reach the same level as that in the Czech Republic. As a result, by 1970 the share of university-educated people in Slovakia (3.0 percent) and the Czech Republic (3.4 percent) was nearly equal. The third period came after November 1989, which marked the beginning of post-socialist transformation of the education system in Slovakia. Slovakia is a member state of the European Union since May 1, 2004 and of NATO since March 29, 2004.

2.1. School system and governance

During the transition years after 1989, Slovak schools gradually regained autonomy in terms of hiring and dismissing teachers, accounting and managing their own budgets. Primary and secondary schools were decentralized in 2002, new per-student formula financing was introduced in 2004 and fiscal decentralization was launched in 2005.³

Dominant persons in the school governance in Slovakia are the principals and representatives of the founder (usually municipality), while parents have a weaker position. Managerial posts at primary and secondary schools are the posts of principals (principals) and deputy principals. The principal is appointed (and also recalled) by the founder based on the results of a competitive procedure run by the school board. School board is an initiative and counseling self-governing body and

³ Fiscal decentralization does not affect significantly the primary and secondary schools, which are the main focus of this study. Funds from the income tax are redistributed to municipalities for so-called original competencies, which in education include e.g. kindergartens, centers for extracurricular activities, school catering, etc. but do not include primary and secondary schools.

has 5 to 11 members based on the size of school: the representatives of teachers, parents and the founder. Since January 2004, a 5-year term was introduced for principals in public schools. In case of a private school or a church school, the principal is appointed and recalled by the founder upon the opinion of the appropriate school board. A proposal for principal dismissal⁴ can be submitted by the school board, the founder, the Principal School Inspector, and since 2004 also by the Minister of Education.

Principals are in charge of all employment issues and human resource management at schools. The employment may be concluded for a definite or indefinite period (tenure), and the teacher may work either full-time or part-time or be employed by several employers. The salary is dependent on the teaching load. Teachers are ranked as public servants⁵: a teacher becomes a public servant when he/she has legal competence, is a person of integrity, meets qualification requirements, health capability to carry out the performed work, and takes a prescribed vow; in case of teaching religious studies verification by the respective church is a must. There is no professional code of ethics for teachers and principals in place.⁶

Parents can participate in school governance either via school boards or parental associations. Parents at each school or school facility can form their own civic association or be a member of the Slovak Council of Parental Associations with an obligation to pay membership fees. The Slovak Council of Parental Associations is a civic organization with its own statute. Its members are parental associations at schools and school facilities, which operate autonomously and have their own budgets. According to a model statute of a parental association⁷, parental associations contribute to the Slovak Council of Parental Associations 5 SKK (0.2 USD) per year per parent as a membership fee. Its mission is to cooperate with the school and with its teachers in the education of children. The model statute assumes that the governance of the parental association is the following: parents in each class form a Class Parental Group (*triedny aktiv*), a platform for communication with teachers, as well as the collector of gifts parents contribute to the parental association. One parent is selected as a representative in the Parental Board. The parental board votes about expenses above SKK 5000/ USD 189. The Parental Board selects 3 members into the Executive Board, which decides about expenses below SKK 5000/ USD 189, expenses below SKK 2000/ USD 76 can be decided on directly by the chairman of the Executive Board. The Executive Board communicates with school management, state bodies, as well as the Slovak Council of Parental Associations, to which it channels the annual membership fees. The chairman of the Executive Board and two other selected members form an Audit Committee, and they check the financing and property administration of the whole parental association. Parental contributions are divided into the „school-level“ and „class-level“, while the latter ones are dealt with

⁴ The reasons of dismissal are explicitly stated in the law (Act No. 596/2003 on state administration in education and school self-government).

⁵ The working conditions are defined by the Labour Code and by work orders of individual types of schools or school facilities. The labour-legal relations and employment were influenced especially by the Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic No. 553/2003 Coll. on performance of work in public interest.

⁶ Paragraph adapted from www.eurybase.org

⁷ Available at the Slovak Council of Parental Associations web page www.srrz.sk

directly by the parents present in the Class Parental Group. The remaining funds are used according to a Parental Association Budget, drafted by the Executive Board and approved by the Parental Board.

2.2. Parental payments in education

The Constitution of Slovak Republic stipulates in the Article 42 that everyone shall have the right to education, which is cost-free at the level of primary and secondary school.

Article 42

(1) Everyone shall have the right to education. School attendance is compulsory. A law shall lay down the duration of school attendance.

(2) Citizens shall have the right to free education at primary and secondary schools and, depending on the abilities of the individual and the potential of society, also at universities.

(3) The establishment of and teaching in schools other than public schools shall be possible only under the terms provided by a law; such schools may collect tuition fees.

(4) A law shall lay down eligibility for financial assistance for students provided from public funds.

According to two main acts governing the schools administration and schools financing⁸, if a school/school facility also provides non-educational services to pupils along with the cost-free education, then parents contribute to cover part of these costs as well as partial costs of extracurricular activities, if their child attends them. Multiple regulations stipulate the amount of contributions as well as the categories of pupils eligible for certain discounts or subsidies for low-income families. The table below provides detailed overview of parental payments in education. In general, parents pay contributions to cover part of the costs for school meals and school boarding, for kindergartens, as well as for extracurricular activities in different school facilities. The state provides free textbooks, reimburses travel costs for certain categories of commuting pupils. There is a voucher system for extracurricular activities in place: vouchers can be used at schools for after-school activities and in selected types of school facilities for extracurricular activities.

Informal parental payments, i.e. payments which parents pay to a school, its representatives or organizations related to the school and for which they do not receive any income receipt, are a common feature of the Slovak education system. Its various forms were rooted already during the socialist era, when it anecdotally served mostly for school events, trips, and certain school aids, such as magazines used at lessons. With the arrival of market economy, school fundraising aimed towards parents became both stronger and more targeted, usually at more affluent parents, entrepreneurs or parents with extensive business contacts. Fiscal problems that Slovak schools faced mainly during the 1990s partially transformed the purpose of parental payments to cover the maintenance and modernization of schools as well.

⁸ Act No. 596/2003 on state administration in education and school self-government, Act No. 597/2003 on the financing of primary schools and secondary schools and school facilities

Table 1. Overview of parental payments in education

Category A: Formal payments for mandatory education activities (legal and documented)		
Clothing (special clothes for some subjects, such as PE, work in laboratories)	No contributions from public funds, parents buy and pay directly.	No special subsidies for low-income families.
School supplies (stationary for mandatory subjects)	No contributions from public funds, parents buy and pay directly.	Subsidies for low-income families ⁹ on school supplies. Maximum 1000 SKK / 38 USD per child per school year. The school's founder and the school buy these school supplies from funds they receive for eligible pupils.
School transport	Usually, parents pay directly to providers. The state reimburses travel costs to students at primary and special needs primary schools that commute to a school in another town/village and if there is no public school in their own village.	No special subsidies for low-income families.
School camp (several classes in grades 1-4 spend 1-2 weeks during the school year learning outside their school – in a school camp)	Parents pay the full costs of transport and boarding and catering in the school camp. The school covers these costs to teachers.	No special subsidies for low-income families.
Category B: Formal payments for elective activities/ services (legal and documented)		
School meals	Municipalities receive contributions from public funds (share on income tax) based on the number of children who can potentially attend school canteens in their domain (both public and private) and determine their budgets (private and church facilities must get at least 90% of funds allocated by the formula). Parents pay a sum to cover a part of the costs, determined by the school	Subsidies for low-income families ¹¹ on school meals. Parents pay 1 to 5 SKK per meal, school founder determines this amount. The maximum monthly contribution from public funds is 500 SKK/ 19 USD per child.

⁹ Subsidies for school catering, school supplies and scholarships are provided by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family. Eligible are pupils in kindergartens, primary schools, special primary schools, who live in a family with total income below subsistence level. If more than 50% of children in one school are from low-income families, then all the children at that school are eligible for the subsidies.

	canteen directly to it.	
Preprimary education (kindergartens are not included in the compulsory school attendance)	Parents pay at least 50 SKK / 2 USD and a maximum ¹⁰ of 384,75 SKK/ 14.5 USD as a tuition – the exact sum is determined by the school founder.	Low-income families pay zero or reduced tuition. Also, subsidies for school meals are in place, as well as for school supplies for kids in the final year prior to school attendance.
After-school club (for pupils in grades 1-4)	Parents pay at least 50 SKK/ 2 USD and a maximum ¹² of 384.75 SKK/ 14.5 USD as a tuition – the exact sum is determined by the school founder.	Low-income families pay zero or reduced tuition up to 50 SKK/ 2 USD monthly.
Center for extra-curricular activities, school center for extra-curricular activities	Parents pay at least 50 SKK/ 2 USD and a maximum ¹² of 384.75 SKK/ 14.5 USD as a tuition – the exact sum is determined by the school founder. Many centers offer discounts if a child submits an education voucher.	Low-income families pay zero or reduced tuition up to 50 SKK/ 2 USD monthly.
Primary school of arts	Parents pay between 102.6 SKK/ 4 USD and 513 SKK/ 19 USD (2-10% of subsistence level) for individual classes, and between 51.3 SKK/ 2 USD and 256.5 SKK/ 9.5 USD (1-5% of subsistence level) for group classes, such as drama, visual arts, dancing	
Boarding (school dormitories)	Parents pay between 300 SKK/ 11 USD and 1053 SKK/ 40 USD (max. 45% of subsistence level of a child).	Low-income families pay zero or reduced contribution up to 200 SKK/ 7.5 USD monthly.
Category C: Private contributions to support general activities (voluntary but undocumented). This includes a voluntary gift of computers to class made by some parent or his company, flowers to show general support to teachers, etc. These are for general use and no service is expected in return.		
Category D: Informal payments for elective activities (voluntary but undocumented). This includes voluntary gifts, such as new basketballs for the team, telescope for those in interest in astronomy, etc. No service is expected in return.		
Category E: Informal payments (mandatory and without record). Requesting contributions to a class or a school.		
Payments to the “class fund”	Parents pay either in cash to	Sometimes schools/teachers

¹⁰ Maximum is defined as 7.5% of subsistence level of an adult, this level is adjusted annually

and/or “parental association”, to cover smaller unexpected expenses (the class fund – for example class decorations) or planned expenses that occur during the school year.	teachers or to the bank account of the parental association.	take into account the low-income families or requested payments are lower for families who have more children at the same school.
Payments for textbooks, school-aids, magazines used as supplementary teaching materials at lessons, often at foreign language lessons. Also fees for photocopying, school storage boxes and dressing rooms, contributions for school modernization, payments for private tutoring classes.	Parents pay usually in cash to teachers.	
Payments for school maintenance and modernization (painting, cleaning, purchase of new windows, etc.).	Parents pay usually in cash to teachers.	
Payments linked with commercial activities, such as: a private photographer coming to take pictures of the class, sale of various books, magazines, atlases that are not directly linked with education.	Parents pay usually in cash to teachers.	
Payments for extracurricular activities, school events, trips, visit to theatres, concerts, etc.	Parents pay usually in cash to teachers.	
<p>Category F: Payments to specific teachers or administrators in exchange for a service for specific children (undocumented, contrary to professional conduct, and illegal). Examples: bribes for grades, bribes for admission to a school, fees for private tutoring in exchange for education advancement.</p>		

3. Research Findings

Based on the data from qualitative and quantitative surveys, this section examines the general characteristics of informal parental payments in education, as well as the main causes and likely impacts they have.

3.1. Nature of parental informal payments

In the study, the term “(parental) informal payments” is used to describe those payments that parents pay to a school, its representatives or organizations related to the school and for which they do not receive any income receipt. As defined in the previous Table 1, these payments can be either legal or illegal. A clear explanation of this term was crucial when carrying out the survey and focus groups. As one of the questionnaire survey administrators says: *“Parents were the best respondents in this survey, they provided a lot of information, but still, I was surprised by one thing – they do not consider the expenses they pay as «informal». (...) They have paid for so many years on that now they do not even realize it. Most of them at first hesitated to confirm that what they pay are informal payments. What followed afterward was a*

bunch of questions whether «also this expense and also that one» belong to informal payments.”

3.1.1. Types of informal payments

From the point of view of parents (in the capital Bratislava and in the town of Dolný Kubín) and secondary school students (in Bratislava) attending the focus groups, informal payments can roughly be divided into three groups:

- Expected education-related payments requested at the start of a school year, such as:

Payments to the “class fund” administered by the class teacher and payments to “parental associations”, to cover smaller unexpected expenses as well as planned expenses that occur during the school year. Focus groups respondents knew usually little about the actual use of these funds and only in one case there was a transparent system in place at a school that provided information on the use of parental contributions, and only one case when the class teacher had all the invoices kept in a book and brought it to parental meetings to show the actual use of the class fund.

Payments for textbooks, school-aids, magazines used as supplementary teaching materials at lessons, often at foreign language lessons. In this case, parents from both regions agreed that requested payments are too high. Quoting one parent: *“My child attends a public school and should get free textbooks. I do not understand why we have to pay for English language textbooks 700-800 SKK, then for an English magazine, rarely used at lessons, another 300 SKK. My son has not even received the original magazine, only a copy.”* Other payments mentioned at focus groups were: photocopying fees, school storage boxes and dressing rooms fees, contributions for school modernization, payments for private tutoring lessons.

- Unexpected payments requested during the course of the year, such as:

Payments for school maintenance and modernization (painting, cleaning, purchase of new windows, etc.). Schools present these payments as voluntary, but most parents usually pay them, because they believe it is one of ways to improve the learning conditions for their children.

Payments linked with commercial activities, such as: a private photographer coming to take pictures of the class, sale of various books, magazines, atlases that are not directly linked with education. Though these are not requested directly by the school, the fact that the school or the teacher allows promotion of these activities at or between lessons puts an indirect pressure on parents via children. In the words of one parent: *“Explain to your child that she will not be on the common photograph of the class, because you consider 150 SKK for one picture as wasted money. Sometimes a photographer comes three times a year. The teacher only says – bring money, the pictures of the class will be taken.”* A teacher explains about the practices of dealers: *“They literally lend the books to children to take them home. But it is necessary to talk to parents at the parental meeting and not allow them to do it this way. Once a parent came to me and he was true when he said «OK, my son brought a book home, we had a problem about it, there was a lot of crying, so here you are – 200 SKK. But what are you going to give them next? Candies?» They (the dealers) know it is business and they know how to do it.”*

- Payments for extracurricular activities, school events, trips, visit to theatres, concerts, etc. Parents had a positive attitude towards these payments; the only

problem they bear is the little transparency of how the collected funds are used in practice. Only in minor cases, parents get income receipts or ex-post information about the real costs of these activities.

From the point of view of the school legislation, all the above-mentioned informal payments are legal, if parents paid them voluntarily. On the other hand, such payments are not legal in the following cases: (a) if there is some pressure exerted by a school or its representatives, like in the example described in section 3.1.7 when the school refused to issue a school-leaving diploma until a family paid the requested parental contribution, (b) if the payments are corruption-linked (see §§328-336 of the Slovak Criminal Code), e.g. when parents pay and the school representatives accept bribes for example to improve grades, to admit applicants to a school etc. Although we cannot estimate the portion of illegal payments in all the undocumented payments made by parents, the questionnaire survey and focus groups results suggest that illegal payments are generally less frequent than legal informal payments. The motivation to gain unfair advantage by making informal payments is present, but it is not prevailing: 70% of teachers do not think that parents expect them to give their children better grades in exchange for making informal payments to a school. This corresponds with the opinion of 79% of parents who do not agree that parents make informal payments firstly to improve the grades of their children. The presence of illegal informal payments was also indicated by secondary school students at the focus group interviews: *“there are several parents – donors of the school – who, as I believe, want to improve the results of their children this way”*, and *“there are students in our class that could not have passed the entrance exams as they did not master elementary content and they were still admitted to school in the appeals procedure”*.

There have been two uncovered corruption cases in the Slovak education sector by now (see Box 2). The first one ended with a final judgment against the former head of the School Office in Trnava for accepting bribes (imprisonment suspended for 12 months, with the probation period of two years) and in the second case, the police investigation is completed with the draft bill of indictment.

Though a vast majority of informal payments reported by parents in our survey were formally legal, there is a group of legal payments that can be considered unfair or unethical. In the words of one teacher *“parental payments are voluntary, but it is forced voluntarism”*. The pressure to pay can often be very difficult to prove and is mostly based on the fact that payments are collected openly in the classroom and pupils are intermediaries in the whole process from announcing payments at home to bringing cash to school, as described in detail in section 3.1.7. Focus groups respondents mentioned payments for textbooks, workbooks, and magazines as an example of such unfair payments. Though the textbooks should be provided to students at primary and secondary schools for free, payments for foreign language textbooks and workbooks for different subjects are frequent (86% parents report paying for them). Also, parents at focus groups presented a negative attitude towards commercial activities where the school allows marketing in the classroom (e.g. dealers coming with books, atlases, photographers, insurance brokers, etc.).

Box 2. Corruption cases in the Slovak education sector

<p>The Slovak Press Agency reported in 2007 that the former head of the school office in Trnava, Peter Levák, was found guilty for accepting bribes and he got imprisonment suspended for 12 months, with the probation period of two years. The District</p>

Prosecutor required stronger punishment without suspension, but the court accepted a social guarantee given by Levák's fellow teachers at the secondary vocational school in Trnava, where he currently works and took into account the length of the investigation procedure, as well as the fact that Levák had not been punished before. Levák took bribes for promising to help with admission to schools. He was found guilty in three cases. In the first case, the police made use of an agent, from whom Levák took 80.000 SKK in September 2001 and promised to ensure admission to a university. He took another 15.000 SKK for ensuring the admission of a student to a business academy. He requested 25.000 SKK from a parent to whom he promised to ensure the admission of his son to a grammar school in Vrbové or another secondary school in Trnava.

An investigator of the Bureau of the Fight against Corruption at the Presidium of the Police Forces completed the investigation procedure with the bill of indictment against 53-year old Ján B. and 52-year old Ľudmila K. for accepting bribes. Ján B. requested 10.000 SKK in a phone call for ensuring the admission of a student to an external study program at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra after the official admission procedure had already been finished. He took money from the father of the student and gave them to Ľudmila K., who worked at the Study Office of this university and who admitted the student to university. Both indicted could be imprisoned for 3 to 8 years. This case is the first uncovered corruption case in higher education in Slovakia. The chief of the Bureau of the Fight against Corruption Tibor Gašpar said for the daily SME that other cases will follow: "Our Bureau monitors the situation in the education sector and I do not think that this is the last case from this area".

3.1.2. How much parents pay on informal basis

Parents (513 respondents) were surveyed about how much they pay informally and how relevant this sum is in terms of their family budgets.¹¹ On the other hand, teachers (454) were asked how much they collect on parental payments. In the following text, we distinguish between information provided by teachers and by parents in the questionnaire survey.

Parents estimate that during the academic year, they pay on average¹² SKK 19 773/ USD 748.01 on all education-related expenses, which is 6% of the average combined household income. If the sum is recalculated per one school-aged child, then the average¹³ education-related expenses are SKK 12 447/ USD 470.87 per school-aged child yearly.

Informal parental payments make up 17% of all the education-related expenses. Half of families pay at least SKK 1 000/ USD 38 on informal payments for their children annually, the average payment was SKK 3 012/ USD 114.¹⁴ Average informal payments are low in terms of the family budget: they make up for less than 1% of the

¹¹ The average SKK/USD (SKK 26.434/USD 1) exchange rate of the National Bank of Slovakia for February 2007 when the survey was conducted.

¹² median SKK 13 000/ USD 491.79

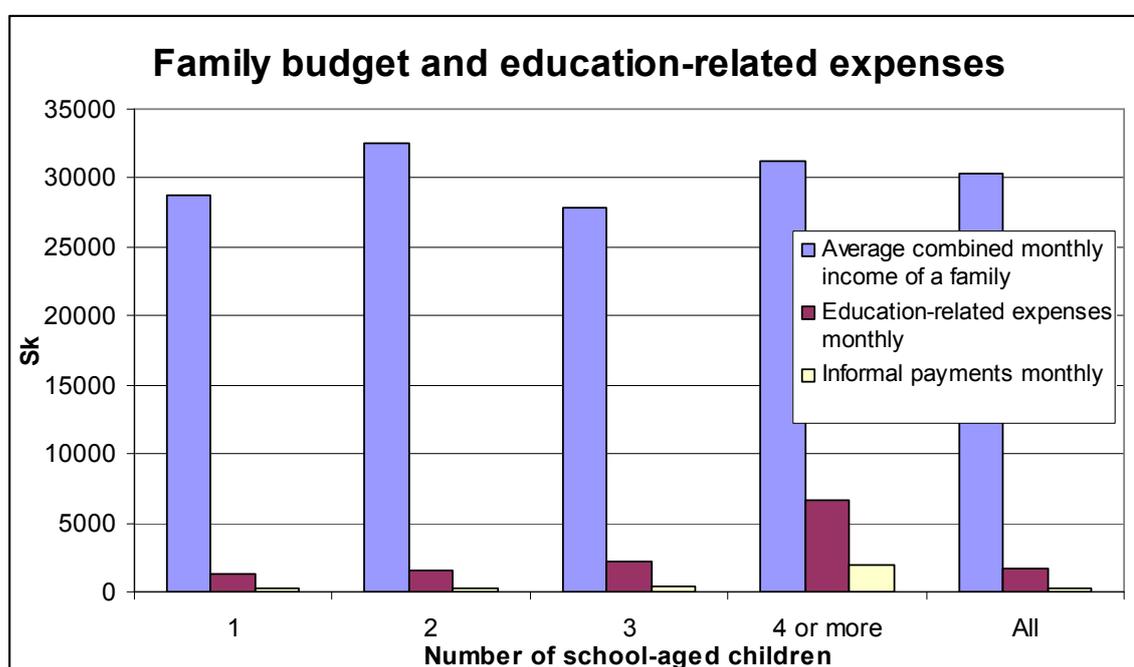
¹³ Median SKK 9 000/ USD 340.47

¹⁴ These numbers are in accord with the estimate given by parents on "an average family" – they believe that half of families spend per year per child on informal payments for public education at least some SKK 1 000/ USD 37.83 (mean SKK 2 931/USD 110.88).

average combined household income¹⁵ (see Graph 1), but their relevance differs by the family financial situation, as focus group interviews illustrate in section 3.3.2. Also, these payments are usually one-time payments (see section 3.1.4) occurring either at the start of the school year or unexpectedly in the course of the school year and it is thus more difficult to accommodate such sudden expenses not only for the low-income families.

With more school-aged children in the family, the total sum on supplemental contributions is increasing, though not proportionally. Most families in our sample had one or two children: half of families with one school-aged child pay at least SKK 960/ USD 36.32 (mean SKK 2 209/ USD 83.57), with two children at least SKK 1 172/ USD 44.34 (mean SKK 2 985/ USD 112.92), and with three children at least SKK 2 250/ USD 85.12 (mean SKK 3 438/ USD 130.06) total per school-year.

Graph 1. Family budget and education-related expenses in SKK¹⁶



3.1.3. How much teachers collect on informal payments

Teachers are one of the main, but not the only one, collectors of informal payments in education. Therefore, the sum of informal payments collected by teachers is different from that reported by parents. Teachers collect mostly money for school events, textbooks, and extracurricular activities, private tutoring on individual basis and one fifth of teachers also collect contributions to parental associations. Parents most frequently¹⁷ pay contributions to parental associations, for school events, textbooks, extracurricular activities and private tutoring on individual basis. In Graph 2 and

¹⁵ An average combined **monthly** household income is SKK 30 328/USD 1147.31 (median SKK 28 000/USD 1059.24), this income recalculated per child is SKK 20 659/USD 781.53 on average (median SKK 18 000/USD 680.94).

¹⁶ The number of observations for families with 4 or more children is only 9, so the statistics may be inaccurate. The number of observations for each type of family respectively: 218, 223, 59, 9, total: 509.

¹⁷ Apart from these, parents frequently pay legal payments for transport to school (45% of parents pays the item, the average annual per student payment is SKK 4200/USD 158.89) and for school meals (67%, SKK 5530/USD 209.20).

related Table 2 we can see the complex picture of the most common informal payments, from the point of view of both teachers-collectors and parents-payers.

Teachers estimate that “a teacher like them” collects SKK 53/USD 2 per child monthly, which is SKK 979/USD 37 per class monthly¹⁸. There is a significant¹⁹ difference between teachers from urban (SKK 1169/USD 44.2) and rural (SKK 676/USD 25.6) schools, regardless of whether the school is primary or secondary. As much as 82% of teachers and 72% of principals and 67% of parents disagree with the statement that “informal payments are an important source of income for their school”.

Graph 2. Supplemental payments as viewed by parents and teachers

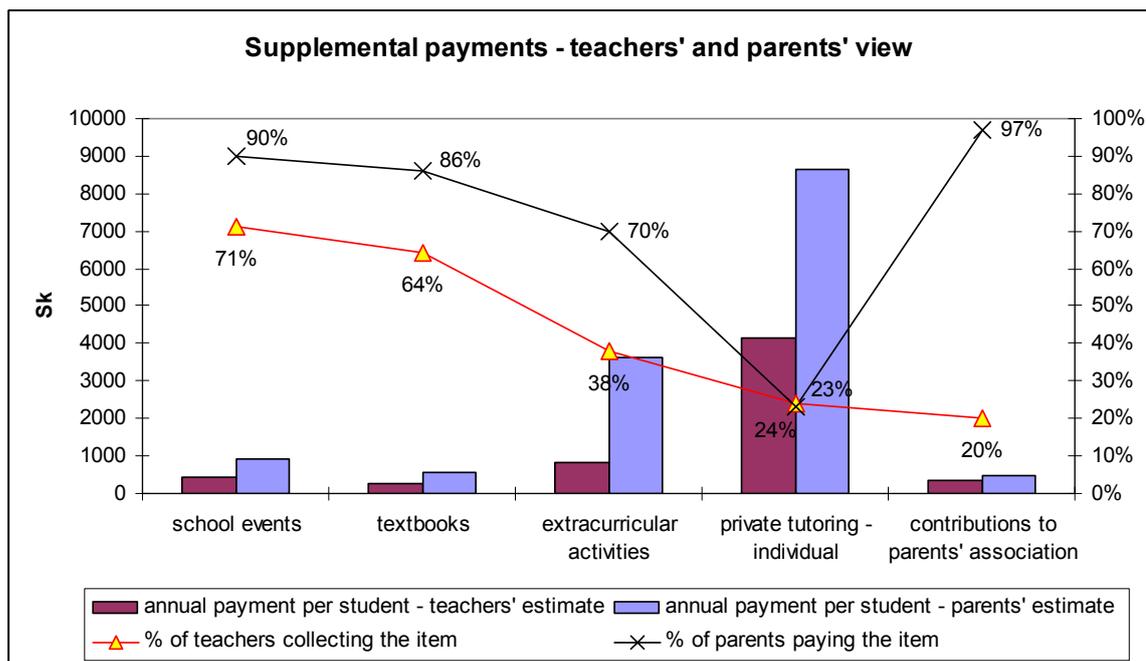


Table 2. Informal payments: teachers' and parents' points of view in SKK (USD)

	Annual payment per student		Share of teachers collecting the item	Share of parents paying the item
	Teachers' estimate	Parents' estimate		
school events	430 (16.3)	900 (34.1)	71%	90%
textbooks	270 (10.2)	550 (20.8)	64%	86%
extracurricular activities	820 (31)	3620 (136.9)	38%	70%
private tutoring - individual	4170 (157.8)	8650 (327.2)	24%	23%
fees to parental associations	330 (12.5)	470 (17.8)	20%	97%

¹⁸ Median is SKK 400/USD 15

¹⁹ ANOVA F-statistic df (1, 407), value=6.278, prob.>0.0126

Apart from the prevailing cash informal payments, parents can contribute also via the 2% of income tax assignation mechanism. As much as 43% of surveyed parents contributed to an organization related to the school of their child (on national level, 12% of natural persons and 20% of legal persons assigned 2% of income tax in 2007 period). However, 61% of teachers and 60% of principals disagreed that this was an important source of income for their school.

Less common and less important informal payments in terms of family budgets are payments for gifts/offers to teachers (52% of parents, SKK 190/ USD 7.19 per student annually), for school security, such as student insurance (34% of parents, SKK 80/USD 3.02 per student annually), for school repair work (22% of parents, SKK 210/USD 7.94 per student annually), for examinations (14%, SKK 320/USD 12.11 per student annually).

The views of teachers and parents on informal payments differ on two main points:

- Parents report higher sums paid on informal payments than teachers estimate.
- Parents report teachers to be more important collectors of these items than teachers admit themselves. For example, 97% of parents pay contributions to parental associations, and 44% of parents say they pay these contributions directly to teachers, while only 20% of teachers say they collect this type of payment.

3.1.4. Frequency of informal payments

Payments are mostly one-time rather than recurring: teachers report that one-time payments make 88% of the total informal payments collected. Recurring payments appear less²⁰ at rural schools (recurring payments at rural schools: 6%, urban schools: 16%). Teachers report that most payments are made in the form of cash (92%) and less in the form of gifts/in-kind (8%) and there is no statistical difference between different types of schools or their location.

Most parents (41%) report that they are expected to pay supplemental contributions once a semester, 33% once a school-year, and 21% once a month. The frequency of collection does not significantly differ between types of schools or their location. The table below summarizes the frequency of different payments.

²⁰ ANOVA F-statistic df (1, 293), value= 22.99, prob.>0.0000

Table 3. The frequency of the most common informal parental payments

	NEVER	EVERY DAY	ONCE PER WEEK	ONCE PER MONTH	ONCE PER SEMESTER	ONCE PER SCHOOL YEAR
CONTRIBUTIONS TO PARENTAL ASSOCIATION	3.33			1.37	13.92	81.37
SCHOOL EVENTS	9.54		0.40	17.89	52.88	19.28
TEXTBOOKS	13.53			1.18	17.84	67.45
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES	29.90	0.20	6.34	19.21	30.50	13.86
GIFTS/ OFFERS TO TEACHERS	47.85				18.75	33.40
PRIVATE TUTORING (ON AN INDIVIDUAL BASIS)	77.06	0.39	10.78	8.82	1.18	1.76
SCHOOL REPAIR WORK	77.51	0.20		0.20	3.55	18.54
EXAMINATIONS	85.85			0.59	3.54	10.02

3.1.5. Recipients of informal payments

From the ten most frequent parental payments linked with education, the following are almost always paid directly to providers outside schools: stationary, clothes/shoes, school meals and school transportation. Inside the school, teachers collect the following payments:

- Between 20-25% of payments for private tutoring on individual basis made by parents goes to teachers, the rest goes to other persons outside schools.
- Contributions to parental associations. In this case, parents and teachers report differently: parents say they pay either directly to parental association or its representatives (52% of parents) or to teachers (44%). Only 20% of teachers report that they collect these contributions.
- Teachers say they are major collectors of payments for school events (71%), textbooks (64%) and extracurricular activities (38%). Parents report that teachers are major collectors of payments for school events (83%), textbooks (79%) and school security – insurance of pupils (73%).

Table 4. To whom do parents pay? Top 10 most frequent education-related payments as estimated by teachers (in %)

	teacher	principal	parents group	other school official	others	% of families paying the item – teachers' estimate

CLOTHES/SHOES	0.80			0.27	98.94	98%
STATIONARY	5.67		2.06	1.29	90.98	97%
CONTRIBUTIONS TO PARENTS COMMITTEE	20.05	3.02	74.73	0.82	1.37	96%
SCHOOL LUNCH		0.54	0.81	53.24	45.41	93%
SCHOOL EVENTS	70.98		6.29	4.20	18.53	81%
TEXTBOOKS	64.09	0.93	4.02	4.64	26.32	74%
SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION				1.37	98.62	71%
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITES	37.80	0.48	4.78	21.05	35.89	63%
PRIVATE TUTORING (INDIVIDUAL BASIS)	24.40			8.33	67.26	41%
GIFTS AND/OR OFFERS TO TEACHERS	50.44	0.88	1.77	0.88	46.02	30%

Table 5. Top 10 most frequent payments linked with education – reported by **parents** (%)

	teacher	principal	parents group	other school official	others	% of families paying the item
STATIONARY	8.97			0.21	90.81	99%
CLOTHES/SHOES	0.93	0.23		0.23	98.61	98%
CONTRIBUTIONS TO PARENTS COMMITTEE	43.63	0.25	52.45	1.47	2.21	97%
SCHOOL EVENTS	83.38		1.88	2.68	12.06	90%
TEXTBOOKS	78.52	0.23	0.46	2.77	18.01	86%
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITES	30.03	0.34	1.02	17.41	51.19	70%
SCHOOL LUNCH	0.94	0.31	0.31	67.71	30.72	68%
GIFTS AND/OR OFFERS TO TEACHERS	35.94		9.68		54.38	52%
SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION	2.28			1.37	96.35	46%
SCHOOL SECURITY	73.38	1.30		1.95	23.38	34%

3.1.6. Purposes of informal payments

Teachers report that on average some 8% of collected funds go to principals (who then decide on their use), 43% go to the class for various supplies and the remaining 49% are used for school-level improvements and events. The main difference²¹ is between primary and secondary schools – informal payments at primary schools are more class targeted. Teachers at primary schools report 46% of funds flowing to classes and 46% for school-level purposes, whilst teachers from secondary schools assign 30% to classes and 66% to school level.

One of the main findings from the focus group interviews is that parents have very little if any information about the actual use of the funds they pay on informal basis. Only in one case, there was a transparent system in place at a primary school in Bratislava that provided information on the use of parental contributions: *“During the first meeting of the parental association we make a plan of expenses, for example, how much we will spend on games and competitions for children, how much on the computer lab and so on. Parents vote about the plan. We can also read the official minutes from the School Board meeting where the plan for the whole school is made. At the end of the school-year, a detailed review of all the budget items is done.”*

The focus groups in the capital and in Dolný Kubín indicate that schools in Bratislava provide more information about the use of parental contributions – at least the plans are discussed in the regular parental meetings with class teachers, even though the ex post reviews of actual use of the funds are rare. The focus groups also revealed that the differences depend rather on the attitude of individual teachers than on school policy: some teachers keep detailed records about the use of funds, others do not provide any information at all. A teacher explains: *“I was running a project in my class and children had to pay some expenses. Each month we collected money and had strict rules about their use. ... On each parental meeting, we brought the book of invoices with explanation on what purposes the money was spent. But during the 7 years I was running this project with these parents, nobody ever took this book to look inside. I always gave it to the first row to a first parent sitting there and told them ‘It is your money; we work with it, look at it please.’ But parents always gave it back saying ‘we trust you, we see what has all been done in classes.’”*

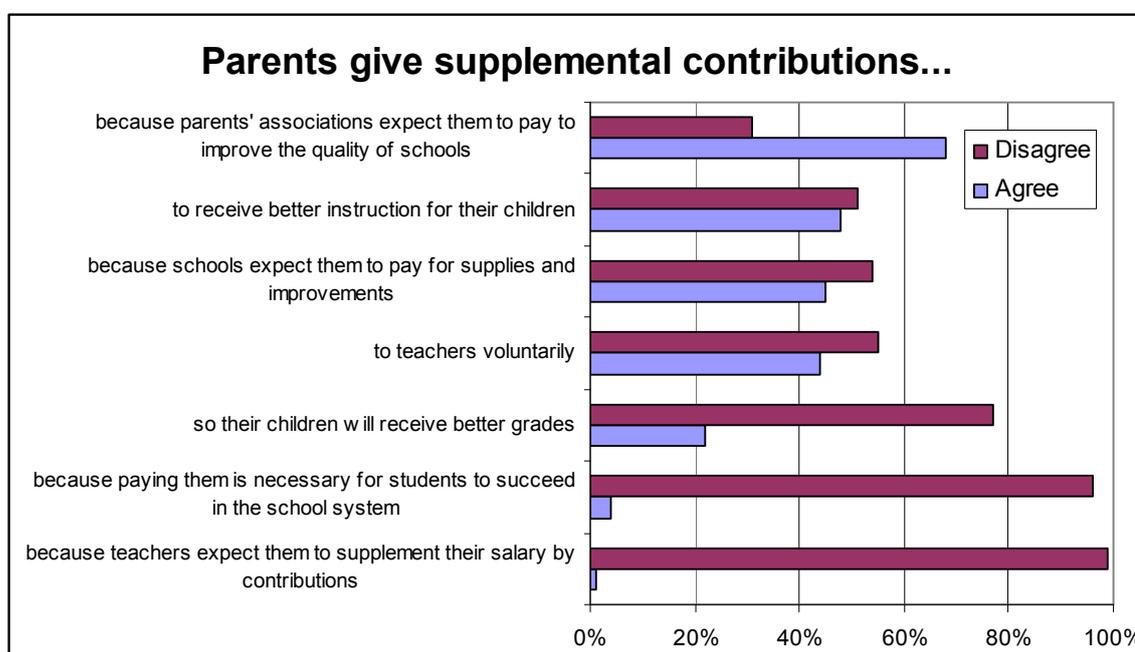
Communication between parents and the school about finances is weak and as a result, parents often become suspicious about the school. In the words of one respondent from Dolný Kubín: *“How do they persuade us? They do not. They simply announce the required payment at the regular parental meeting or they only write it into the student record of each child. There is no discussion about it. It is all such a forced voluntarism.”* On the other hand, parents are passive and mopey about school activities and financing and they communicate with the school only about the educational achievements of their children. A secondary school student in Bratislava says: *“I think that our parents do not learn more at the parental meeting than we do. They do not inquire about it and teachers do not talk about it. Perhaps it is useless to find out about the use of finances. Rather than digging into the use of funds, parents simply pay once a semester. Why should they make problems?”* A parent explains: *“Parents are often ashamed to ask about money, because they are afraid other parents will think - he has trouble paying even 500 SKK and therefore is asking about it. So they prefer to remain silent.”*

²¹ ANOVA t-test probability value: 0.0249

Focus groups respondents talked about differences between the 1st - 4th grade at primary school, where children have usually only one teacher and communication is much better compared to the 5th-9th grade at primary school and secondary school where there are different teachers for different subjects.

It seems that parents adopted a passive role in the system of informal payments and thus the payments have become deeply rooted and traditional. Parental answers about the primary reasons they have for giving informal payments seem to support this theory. Two thirds of parents agreed that they pay because parental associations expect them to pay in order to improve the quality of schools. Opinions are split on whether payments are motivated by the wish to receive better instruction for their children and the expectations of schools to receive payments for supplies and improvements. As much as 55% of parents report they do not pay voluntarily (see Graph 4).

Graph 4. Why parents give supplemental contributions – reported by parents



3.1.7. Pressures to make informal payments

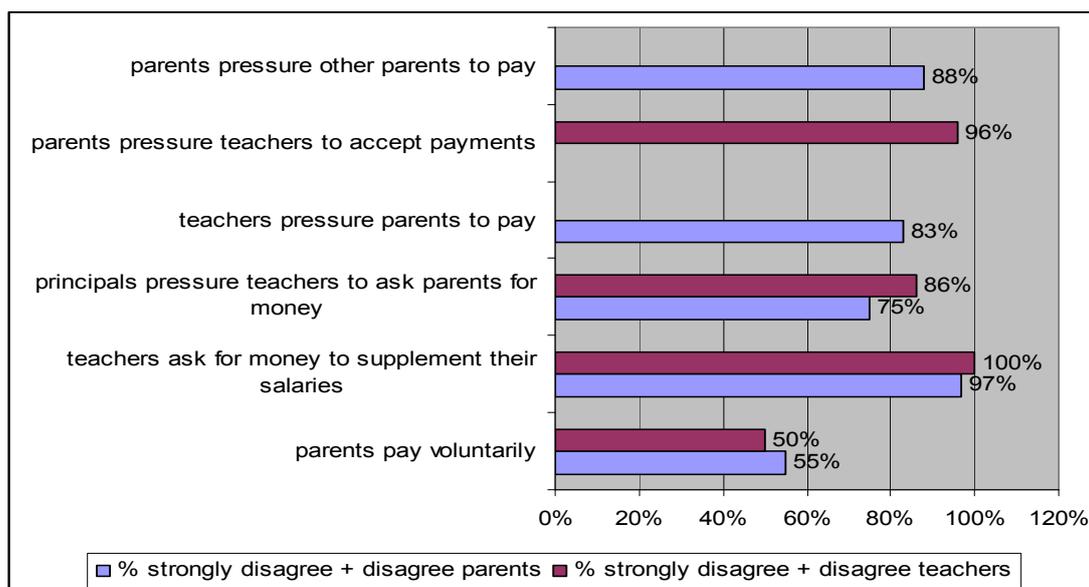
The quantitative survey does not provide us with a clear answer on where the pressure on parents to make informal payments comes from. Both teachers and parents have a split opinion whether informal payments are made by parents voluntarily or not. However, neither parents nor teachers²² can clearly identify where the pressure on parents come from – they **disagree** that it is because of pressure exerted by school officials, school principals, teachers asking for money to supplement their salaries,

²² Even the answers of 37 principals do not clarify the issue of where the pressure to make/accept informal payments comes from: 84% of principals disagree that schools must accept parental payments because of their insufficient budgets, 95% of principals disagree that parents pressure them to admit their children to school (or to accept money for admission), and 92% of principals disagree that other school officials encourage them to ask parents for money, 97% of principals disagree that they encourage teachers to ask parents for money for school-related activities.

parents pressuring other parents to pay or parents pressuring teachers to accept money.

Parental trust in the school and its teachers and principal is high: 92% of parents trust that their children’s teacher makes decisions in the best interest of his or her students, 85% trust that the school principal is fair and honest and finally, 89% trust that their children will receive good education whether they make supplemental contributions or not. 72% of parents do not think that parental contributions hinder or compromise the educational process.

Graph 5. Parents and teachers disagree with the following primary reasons for informal payments



Focus group interviews provide us with a sharper picture. Following the previous text, teachers are the dominant collectors of informal payments at school. One of the main findings of the focus group research is that in the whole system of informal payments children – pupils act as intermediaries. Most of information and cash payments go along the teacher – pupil line, especially the unexpected expenses that occur during the course of the school year. Often, children bring money to schools and give them to their teacher, usually without receiving any receipt. In the words of a focus groups respondent: *“Usually, there appears a message in the student record or my children tell me about the requested payment at home in the evening. What should I do then? Shout at the child that I will not pay that?”*

Most parents at the focus groups agreed that if they did not pay the requested sum, their child would bear the consequences. They do not want to put their children into conflict by ordering them to explain to teachers why their parents decided not to pay. Since the communication and payment procedures for many informal payments is not directly between the school and the parents, there is little room for the explanation of payments and their purpose and parents themselves do not have the opportunity to decline paying the expense without involving the child in the process. A mother from Dolný Kubín says: *“The teacher writes the requirement in the student record and then writes down who’s brought the money. They do not say it is obligatory, but when the child does not bring the money, the class teacher will ask for the money over and over again and then you finally pay. It degrades your child, so you will pay even if you are against it.”*

A teacher shares her personal experience: “*When my daughter was taking her school-leaving examination (maturita), I was in a similar situation and had not enough money to pay the contribution to parental association, since it was quite high. Then I forgot about the payment and my daughter passed the exam, but they did not give her the diploma until I paid the contribution. She brought a reminder to pay and we settled the issue. We all who are in the education sector know that these are such things – parental contribution is voluntary, but it is «voluntary by force»*”.

3.2. What are the causes of informal payments made in schools?

The most frequent reason for making informal payments that parents, teachers and principals identified in the questionnaire survey was **inadequate public funding for schools**. The second most frequent reason both teachers and parents see is that **parents want to increase the quality of schools**.

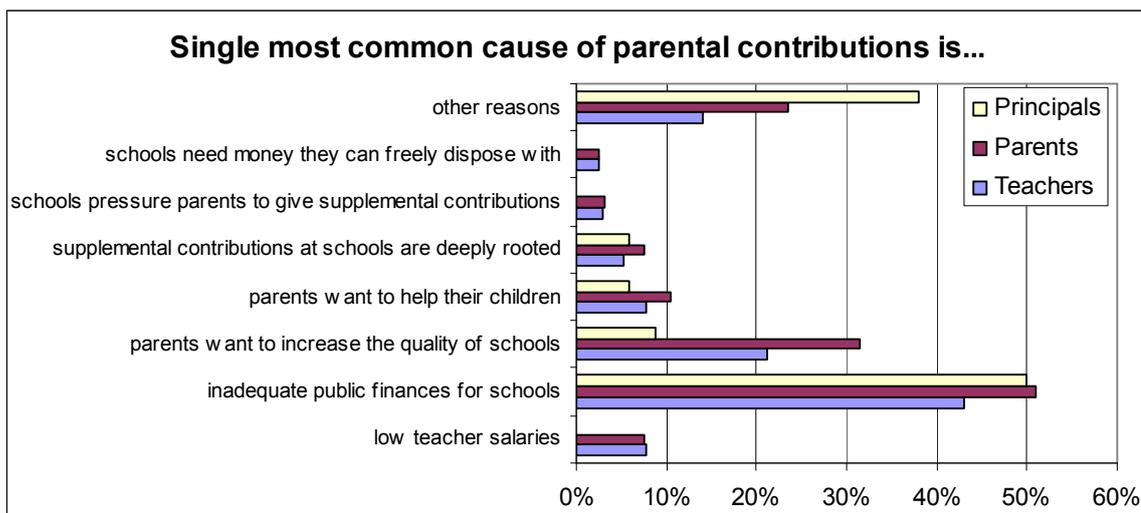
Among “**other reasons**” - the third most frequent answer – **parents reported**: “parents want to pay for extra activities – trips, contests, clubs, modern equipment etc.”, “parents want to modernize the school or contribute to its maintenance”, “school managements are passive or weak in fundraising from other sources than the state and parents”, “municipalities/state do not respond to the problems of schools concerning the financing of maintenance”, “parents do not realize that what they pay are informal payments”, “parental prestige and wish to promote their own child/improve his/her marks or because they do not want to get their child into trouble because of refusing to pay”, “people are used that they have to pay everywhere”. **Teachers** report that “parents want to pay for extra activities – trips, contests, clubs, modern equipment etc.”, “parents want to modernize the school or contribute to its maintenance” and that “parents/businessmen can deduct the contributions from their taxes²³”. **Principals** report: “parents want to pay for extra activities – trips, contests, clubs, modern equipment etc.” and “bad financial policy of municipalities towards schools”.

Although low public financing is considered the main cause of informal payments by all three groups of respondents, 86% of principals confirmed that their school received all the funds allocated to it by the budget. Here, the inadequate funds for schools refer to a low total public budget for education. For example in the PISA 2006 National Report for Slovakia²⁴, Slovak schools indicate greater problems than the OECD average with regard to the availability of textbooks (41% more schools indicate problems than the OECD average), library materials (32% more schools), and 75% of schools indicate lack of materials for laboratory work in sciences.

Graph 6. What is the single most common cause of parental contributions?

²³ This is, however, not true. Since 2003 tax reform this type of deduction has been abolished and even prior to this date, the taxpayers could deduct only a very small part of the contribution.

²⁴ PISA 2006 Slovensko – Národná správa. National Institute for Education, Bratislava 2007, p. 47. Available in Slovak language at: <http://www.statpedu.sk>



Note: Multiple responses were allowed, thus the sums exceed 100%.

Opinions of parents presented at the focus groups provide another insight into the issue of low education financing: *“I worked for 15 years in a kindergarten and we got nothing from the state to buy some paper and stationary. I was looking for donors all year long, so that we could teach children and I was doing a job I was not paid for. It was pleasant neither for me, nor for the parents. (...) Teachers have little motivation to do this [fundraising] job. If a teacher knew that she will get extra money for a successful project she creates, I believe many projects would be prepared. But teachers get the same wage no matter how much extra work someone is doing. If the principal was a manager and had an assistant for fundraising, the school would probably receive much more funds.”*

Low public financing of schools was the main cause of informal payments raised by the focus groups respondents. The fact that parents perceive the cause of the problem as being **outside** the school is one of the main reasons why they are now willing to pay. From the focus groups respondents: *“We all know about the situation at schools. It is enough if you come to a school and it makes you cry ... parents should not solve these problems, but they have no other choice.” “Something must really go wrong at the school in order to make the state act. That is the main problem. We are willing to help if we can.”* The second most frequent cause of informal payments reported at the focus groups was a passive role of schools in fundraising from other sources than from the state and from parents, as well as an inefficient management of schools. The majority of parents at focus groups was skeptical about the success of a ban on informal payments and argued that the system would not disappear and that schools would find ways to cover their various expenses while parents would still participate in financing them so that they do not endanger the education of their children.

From the previous findings it seems that informal payments are a combination of the four factors:

- General perception among parents, teachers and principals that schools receive insufficient public funding and that external sources are needed.
- The will of parents to invest into the education of their children.
- The perception that informal parental payments in education are traditional, which is supported by the fact that none of the three respondent groups clearly

recognized someone of them having much power over the system of informal payments.

- Psychological pressure created by the common mechanism of collecting informal payments: teachers announce usually via children that certain payments are necessary, teachers collect the payments openly in the classroom, i.e. children are intermediaries – they are directly involved in the process of communication between parents and teachers about payments and bringing cash to teachers.

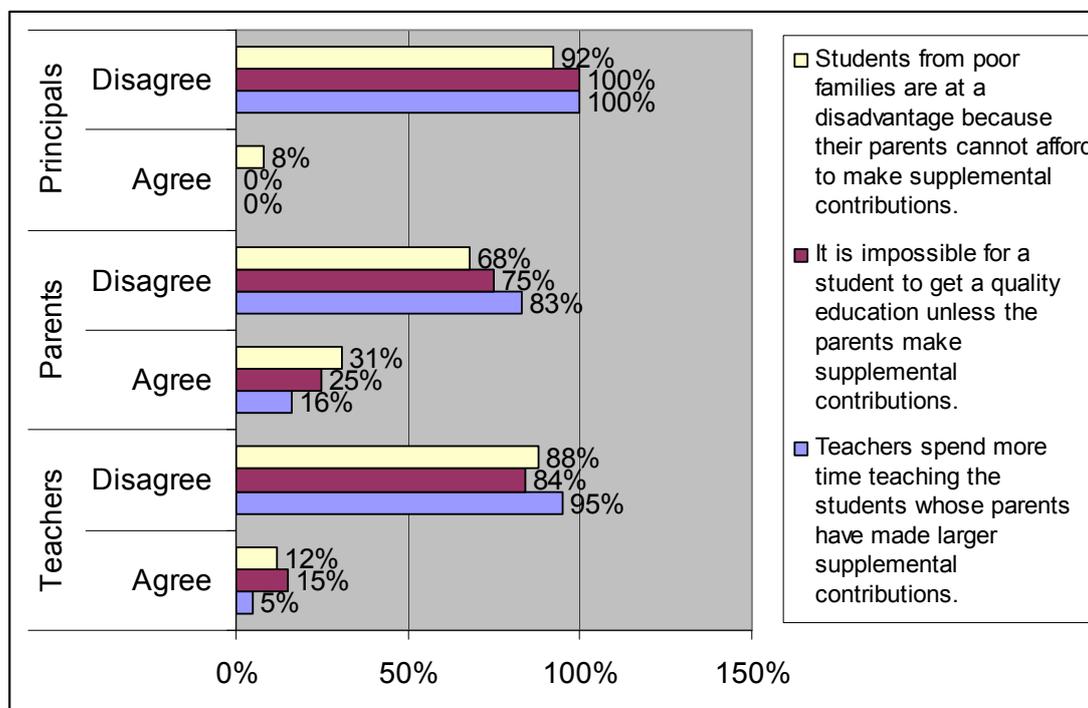
3.3. What is the impact of informal payments?

In the questionnaire survey, several questions were aimed at discovering possible negative impacts of informal payments on the overall quality of primary and secondary education. The focus group interviews also provide insight into the impacts informal payments have on family budgets, pupils and on parents-school relations.

3.3.1. Impact on the quality of education

Parents, teachers and principals do not perceive informal payments as a threat to the overall quality of education at primary and secondary schools. They do not think that teachers spend significantly more time educating the students whose parents have made such payments. Nor do they think that the children of parents who did not give informal contributions are disadvantaged or are not receiving adequate education. Parental answers do not statistically differ by the level of their income per family member, or by the sum of informal payments contributed per child, or between the urban – rural, primary – secondary level.

Graph 7. Teachers, parents and principals about the link between the informal payments and the quality of education



* NA responses make up to 100% of answers

3.3.2. Impact on family budgets

The average share of informal payments in the monthly combined family budget was below 1%. However, the focus group interviews clearly presented that the perception of informal payments differs by the financial situation of the family. The better-off respondents from the capital said that informal payments are not a significant burden to the family budget, but they rather consider their nature to be burdensome. Respondents from Bratislava said that the expenses accumulate at the start of the school year and consider other expenses during the course of the year negligible. If this group of parents could check the purpose of the informal payments and see that their children really benefit from them, then they would be willing to support the school even more than they do now.

On the other hand, respondents from Dolný Kubín perceived the financial burden of informal payments as a significant problem. These parents often find themselves in a situation that they cannot pay the requested expenses and it creates tension in families and in relation to school. One respondent explains: *“It is a problem, if you do not anticipate such an expense, because I do not expect that I will have to pay 1000 or 2000 SKK for school this month. Sometimes I have to repeat to my child day by day that I do not have money now and I will pay later.”*

3.3.3. Impact on children at schools

Because the communication about various expenses and the payment mechanism involve children, they directly bear certain negative impacts of informal payments. Parents perceive this problem as more acute than the financial burden of informal payments. Children become some kind of intermediaries between the school and the parents and get under pressure from the school to “persuade” their parents to pay and must bear parental resentments about these payments and communicate them at school. Usually, parents try to ease their children from this pressure and are more willing to pay certain expenses even though they do not consider them useful and necessary. A mother from Bratislava explains: *“Always, when my child brings a message from school to pay for something, I pay the sum in the end, even if I get really angry – my child tells me with tears in his eyes that other children will surely pay for that and I cannot imagine that I would decline it.”*

Another parent from Bratislava explains: *“I think that if a parent does not give money and the other parents would pay, it is somehow humiliating for the child. At least the child feels disadvantaged, openly disadvantaged – that is the bad thing. That I do not have an expensive car and a house most schoolmates do not know at all. But that I did not bring 1500 SKK in September, more of them will notice and it does not make a good atmosphere among schoolmates and perhaps is a signal in the relation between the parent and the class teacher.”*

It is a paradox that not paying informal payments has a negative impact on the status of a child at school (in relation to his/her class teacher and classmates) and at the same time parents say that if they pay, the quality of education is not significantly better. At focus groups, parents perceived certain expenses as necessary for the education process to run at all (such as contributions for investments and equipment in classes, payments for chalk, paper, etc.). However, payments for supplementary textbooks, magazines, and private tutoring are considered by the parents attending focus groups as inefficiently used: private tutoring at schools is only formal, supplementary textbooks and magazines are rarely used. This corresponds with the questionnaire

survey results where 89% of parents trust that their children will receive a good education whether they make the supplemental payments or not.

3.3.4. Impact on relations between parents and the school

The focus group interviews indicated that communication between the school and parents is weak and mainly concerns the study achievement of children without involving discussion about other activities at school. Parents do not perceive informal payments as a factor worsening the relations they have with the school, they rather criticized their low transparency. Although discontent, parents usually do not get into conflict with the school: parents are rather passive and do not consider informal payments be such a problem worth a conflict with the school, or are skeptical that a solution is possible without negatively affecting their child at school.

One respondent explains: *“I never get into conflict with the school. However difficult it could be, I always find some solution and pay the requested money. Once I got into a conflict with the school principal, but then I rather backed out of it. My son is in the 9th grade, he is going to take exams and it could easily happen that he would not pass them.”*

It seems that cases when parents stand up against informal payments are minor. These parents either communicate directly with the school representatives or submit a motion to the State School Inspection Agency. A mother from Dolný Kubín says: *“I protested against paying for the textbooks for mandatory subjects at our parental meeting. After that, we received our money back.”*

According to Annual Reports about the Education Sector for 2006/07²⁵ and 2007/08 (in print), the State School Inspection Agency receives almost 500 complaints from various people a year, while less than 200 of them are legitimate and further investigated. In the 2007 report, it states that *“A serious and relatively frequent subject of complaints remains e.g. the collection of money from students and their parents against their will (higher sums are paid especially at the external studies of secondary schools). Further, with regard to complaints against teachers the following problems are also listed: “unauthorized collection of money for school maintenance, for school aids, pressuring parents to buy overly expensive textbooks (due to unconscious or willful misconduct)”*. The State School Inspection Agency also includes among problems worth special attention *“pressuring parents to pay various payments at public schools (tuition fees, payments for school maintenance, for textbooks, admission fees, sponsorship fees, financial gifts). According to our [State School Inspection Agency] opinion, it would be suitable to send the school founders an official letter of the Ministry of Education about the illegality of money collection at public primary and secondary schools.”*

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This research is one of the first attempts to uncover the problems of invisible payments at cost-free public schools in Slovakia. Informal payments are wide-spread: almost all parents make cash contribution once or twice a year to a parental

²⁵ Report on the state of education in schools and school facilities in the Slovak Republic in the school-year 2006/2007. The State School Inspection Agency, Bratislava 2007. Available in the Slovak language at: <http://www.ssiba.sk/dokumenty/sprava0607.pdf>

association, between 70 and 90% of parents contributes for various school events, extracurricular activities as well as textbooks and supplementary learning materials.

Though informal payments do not seem to pose a threat to the quality of education, they negatively affect (a) family budgets, especially in low-income families, (b) children who are involved as intermediaries in the process of communicating the payments and actually bringing cash to the school, and (c) the parent-school relations because of their low transparency and little feedback parents receive on the real use of collected funds.

The focus groups survey suggests that most parents are often reluctant to openly challenge this practice as they are afraid that doing so might adversely affect their children attending the school. Only a minority of parents address this issue at schools or via motions to the State School Inspection Agency, which reports about public primary and secondary schools illegally pressuring parents to pay various payments in its 2006 and 2007 annual reports. The agency suggests that school founders should be informed about the illegality of such conduct.

On the other hand, parents are willing to invest in education of their children and have a positive attitude towards payments for extracurricular activities, school events, trips and practical school aids. A group of better-off parents is willing to pay even more, provided that they could check the purpose of such payments and see that their children really benefit from them. However, there are payments that parents criticize because they are unfair or useless, such as payments for textbooks and supplementary learning materials, because textbooks should be provided for free according to current legislation and because supplementary materials, such as magazines, are rarely used at lessons. Negatively perceived were also different payments linked with commercial activities, i.e. when outside dealers come to classes to sell books, atlases, etc. not directly linked with education.

Table 6. Measures to deal with the main problems with informal payments in the Slovak education system

Measure	Description	Responsible actor
Inform managements of primary and secondary schools about the distinction between legal and illegal collection of parental payments	Following the findings of the State School Inspection Agency and this study, a brief explanation of legal vs. illegal collection of parental payments should be prepared and disseminated to school managements. Special emphasis should be put on a list of illegal payments and on providing a sample model of a fair and transparent system of dealing with parental payments at schools.	State School Inspection Agency and authors of the study
Establish a fair and transparent system of planning the expenses and informing parents about the use of parental contributions	Parents should discuss and vote about the plan of expenses. Schools should be pro-active in providing parents with information about the purpose and real use of funds parents contribute. All parents should have an easy access to this information in written form at the	School management and individual teachers

	regular parental meetings.	
Formalize the receipt of payments from parents	Schools should properly record all the received parental payments to prevent possible misuse of funds and provide receipts in return for payments. Non-cash payments should be preferred.	School management
Exclude teachers from the collection of payments	In order to avoid possible pressure on children/parents and to ease the administrative burden from teachers, another school official (non-pedagogical) should be responsible for the collection of parental contributions. These should preferably be paid by wire transfer or check or brought by parents in persons, not by children.	School management
Exclude children from the process of communication about expenses	To enable parents discuss the planned expenses and have the freedom to pay or decline paying, parents directly should be informed about suggested payments at regular parental meetings or in written form if there is no other option.	School management and individual teachers
Abolish unethical marketing of commercial products by teachers or external dealers to children	Schools should not allow marketing activities focused on children, i.e. when external dealers or teachers offer various books, atlases, magazines, insurance products or other items directly to children at schools. Any such offers should be communicated to parents at regular parental meetings.	School management and individual teachers