

## **School Fees Soar**

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Parents struggle to meet spiralling education costs as conditions in schools deteriorate.

Linda Mushava, a secretary, shook her head in disbelief as she looked at the prices of winter uniforms.

“Where am I supposed to get the money from? Please tell me where I am going to get the money. What makes matters worse for me is that I don’t have to just buy the winter uniform but I also have to buy shoes,” said Linda, whose monthly pay of 350,000 Zimbabwean dollars, ZWD, worth 14 US dollars at the black-market rate accessible to most people, is just above the average salary.

“The ones my daughter was using last term are now too small and it will be cruel for me to ask her to squeeze into them.”

With her salary, Linda also has to pay rent, buy food, meet transport costs and school fees. To add to her woes, when the new term started last week, schools fees had gone up by between 600 and 1,000 per cent.

Government primary schools had been charging between 200,000 and 300,000 ZWD (between eight and 20 US dollars) in term fees, while secondary schools levied between 500,000 and one million ZWD (20 to 40 dollars).

This, at a time when conditions in schools only seem to be deteriorating. Parents often have to buy exercise books for their kids. Schools commonly have no running water, soap or cleaning fluids; classrooms are dilapidated and there’s a lack of teaching materials and teachers.

The Progressive Teachers’ Union of Zimbabwe said recently that Zimbabwe has lost 4,500 teachers this year alone; last year, the figure was 6,000. Some have emigrated; others cannot afford to teach and look for jobs in commerce and industry. The profession has also been hard hit by HIV/AIDS.

What makes the new term even worse is that the children will have to endure what meteorologists are predicting will be one of the coldest winters ever.

One distraught parent said, “Imagine a grade one pupil – or just any child, for that matter - with no school shoes, no school jersey, trousers or socks, walking to school on a cold day. In a few weeks’ time, this is going to be the reality.”

A full winter uniform for one child now costs up to five million ZWD, in a country where only very senior managers earn that kind of money.

“Normally, we buy two jerseys, a blazer, two pairs of trousers, two pairs of gloves, at least two pairs of stockings and two scarves,” said Linda Mushava. “This means I need more than four million Zimbabwean dollars [160 US dollars] and in my whole life I have never held that kind of money in my hands. Zimbabwe is mad; there is nothing normal in this country.”

The cost of living for a family of five, according to the country's consumer watchdog, the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe, is now more than 1.5 million ZWD - about 60 dollars at the black-market rate - in a country where unemployment is more than 80 per cent.

Thandi Ncube has been forced to transfer her two children to a school in a poor suburb to cut down on school fees and transport costs.

"Just thinking about how cold it is going to be, I feel like crying - because what are my kids going to wear? My son's shorts are already too small and I can't afford to buy new ones, let alone a pair of trousers," she said. "Transferring them also means that I have to buy new jerseys and I just don't have the money to do so. I fear that my children might freeze to death this winter if I don't get help from my relatives."

With the rise in fees and winter on its way, many children, particularly girls, will be expected to drop out of school to help earn money for the family in various ways, such as selling vegetables and, for the unluckiest ones, even prostitution.

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of an IWPR reporter in Zimbabwe.

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