

The new Minimum Wage: too little too late!



It seems as though Santa has barely hung up his magical sack of goodies before the stationary and uniform lists begin to appear and remind us that the beginning of the school year is just around the corner. Few parents would contest that December to February are by far the most expensive time of the year for a family. Christmas gifts, summer holidays, childcare when parents return to work and then back to school costs, all leave a significant dent in the already battered family bank accounts. I celebrated a little this year knowing that my oldest child, having finished school, would not be presenting me with a stationary list or pieces of uniform in need of replacement. I even felt a little teary when I delivered his school uniform to the Habitat for Humanity uniform drive. However, after sifting through the remaining four stationary lists, I realised my celebration was somewhat premature.

Amongst my children's back to school 'needs' was a skirt costing \$107 which would only be worn for one year and a complete school uniform for another daughter priced at \$432, not including shoes. The uniform is compulsory but as this is only the second year since its introduction, second hand options are limited. Uniforms are easily one of the most expensive school costs. Schools implement uniforms to create a sense of solidarity and reduce discrimination amongst the student community. However, there are possibly few situations more discriminatory to the teenager than standing out amongst your class mates because your parents can't afford your uniform. Many of us send our secondary school aged children to local state high schools to avoid travel costs and expensive school fees. But the family budget is sent reeling when faced with purchasing uniform items which are compulsory. Second hand uniforms are an option but if unavailable, what options do the child or family have? Not wear the correct uniform and face punishment by the school? Truancy? Or perhaps the family seeks supplementary benefits from Work and Income or short term, high interest loans to tie them over? Perhaps we should encourage families to budget better? But budgeting services are reportedly at capacity and budgeting only helps to allocate and prioritise available resources. Even though we are a larger family, we are not a low-income household. These back-to-school costs will all be met through creative budgeting and a couple of months of good old-fashioned belt tightening. But for households who are already struggling to meet living expenses, no amount of belt tightening or creative budgeting will see them through these months when the resources are not available.

The United Nation Convention of Rights of the Child, Article 28 states that "All children have the right to education, which should be free...Young people should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable." For a long time, free education has been part of the kiwi dream but for low income families it is a myth. There is nothing free about a \$150 'compulsory donation' or the compulsory graphics calculator weighing in at \$94.79, on special. As parents, we strive to provide the best for our children. Educating them is our investment in them and society in general. It is not unusual, as a parent, to make sacrifices for one's children. But many families are sacrificing the basic essentials, including food and adequate housing. Hardship funds and time payment schemes offered by

schools help to ease the burden of school expenses, such as activity fees. However, for expenses outside of the school's provision, for example, stationery, parents are left to their own devices. Speaking of devices, the inclusion of laptops and tablets add a new dimension to stationery requirements.

Paying workers a Living Wage provides families with the resources to budget for back to school or extraordinary costs. The Government will increase the minimum wage by 50c to \$15.75 per hour in April, 2017. In stationery terms, after working a 40-hour week, before tax, this amount equates to a scientific calculator or 11 glue sticks (35g) or one quarter of a 7" android tablet. Pay a worker a Living Wage and the family is able to afford the full stationery list for two primary school aged children or two whole 7" android tablets. Paying the Living Wage also enables parents to retain their sense of dignity and pride, secure in the knowledge that they are able to provide for their children regardless of their own education or skill set. Paying workers a Living Wage, affords every child the right to an education. As Auckland Council consults with the public on the Annual Budget, please consider placing a submission for the Living Wage. That all workers, directly paid and contracted to deliver services on a regular and ongoing basis, are paid a Living Wage so they can survive and participate in society.