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Back-to-school shopping 101: How to keep costs down

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Walsh College accounting professors offer tips and tricks for families to keep school supply costs affordable

What can parents do to defray back-to-school costs and stay on top of school-year budgets? Get involved and stay informed, say Walsh College accounting professors [Katherine Konon](http://www.walshcollege.edu/KatherineKonon) (<http://www.walshcollege.edu/KatherineKonon>) and [Maria Gistingner](http://www.walshcollege.edu/mariagistingner) (<http://www.walshcollege.edu/mariagistingner>).

American families will spend an average of \$630.36 on back-to-school needs this fall, according to an annual forecast from the National Retail Federation. The biggest expense in back-to-school budgets is clothing, followed by pricey electronics. That leaves paper, notebooks, pencils and rulers as the most affordable part of a family's budget.

If you're crafty, you can fill a backpack (and buy the backpack, too!) for no more than \$25, insists Konon. That's if families clip coupons, use rewards points, buy in bulk and shop dollar stores, she notes.

While some parents plan ahead and buy heaps of supplies early in the summer from stores that honor 90-day return policies, don't worry if you've waited until the last minute to buy school supplies. In fact, sometimes that is the best time to find rock-bottom pricing and great deals.

Konon, a licensed CPA who spent 14 years working in business and finance departments for school districts before becoming a full-time faculty member at Walsh College in 2011, offers these money-saving tips for back-to-school shopping:

- Team up with other parents to buy in bulk and cut down costs for everyone through volume pricing.
- Check your rewards credit cards for incentives and programs that apply to school supplies.
- Buy off-season (sweatshirts in summer, shorts in winter). Next winter, start stocking up on school supplies. Also, consider waiting to buy clothes. Chances are good that your kids have enough weather-appropriate clothing to make it until the leaves start to change, giving you time to save for such expenditures.
- Parents with financial challenges may qualify for public aid or grants to help purchase school-necessary items. Search online for available monies to help.

As an added benefit, Konon suggests turning back-to-school shopping into a finance lesson for your children. Teach them about "wants" and "needs," and create a list of spending priorities. Discuss how to assess value and the importance of making choices, and show them how to comparison-shop.

You can also demonstrate how to find value by buying store-brand items instead of recognizable brands. Consider garage sales, thrift stores and online shopping for gently-used items like textbooks, musical instruments, sports equipment and other big-ticket needs. Creating a chart to track all school-year expenses such as transportation, tutoring and meals will allow you to discuss budgeting and encourage them to offer ideas for keeping costs down.

During the school year, simple things like packing lunches instead of buying, carpooling and swapping supplies that one family no longer needs are great ways to build community and save money simultaneously.

Getting involved saves money

"The state has been requiring public school systems to become more transparent, meaning school districts have to post their budgets, financial reports and costs of their spending," says Konon. That information is readily available on school district websites and at board meetings and parent-group meetings, which Konon encourages parents to attend – not only as a way to be vigilant in the financial conversation of public education but as a way to make friends, too.

When you're involved, she says, you can play a part in guiding the school in its fundraising to offset costs normally heaped on parents.

Some schools offer special purchase plans for supplies and many host fundraisers during the school year to offset costs. If your school doesn't, getting involved with the parent-group or district board are great ways to effect change by creating events that help subsidize out-of-pocket spending for families by earmarking funds for items that used to be covered by taxpayer dollars.

Start saving for next year

Dr. Maria Gisting, who has spent 25 years in public school finance, encourages parents to budget for back-to-school items as part of their monthly family budgeting. Gisting serves on the accounting faculty at Walsh and is also assistant superintendent for finance for Brighton Area Schools.

"At the beginning of the year, you have registration, school pictures, yearbook, spirit wear, homecoming and prom tickets, PTA dues, athletic fees and, of course, school supplies," Gisting says. "Parents can and should put money aside for school expenses on a monthly basis, so they're not caught off-guard at the end of the summer."

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