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NEWS

Back-to-school supplies supplemented by districts, community groups

Schools, businesses and service groups rally to provide students with supplies at no cost to ease financial stress and foster a sense of community.

By **Shannon Fromma**, Staff Writer
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Ana Vazquez, of Schenectady Heart, hands out free school supplies during the third annual Back to School Block Party at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School on Wednesday in Schenectady.
Jim Franco/Times Union

As the first day of kindergarten approached, Angela Paulo clutched a stack of clothing while her daughter, Alia, excited to update her wardrobe for the new school year, eagerly pulled on a glittery top adorned in butterflies.

The Paulos were among hundreds of families who flocked to Dr. Martin Luther King Elementary School in Schenectady Wednesday for their annual Back-to-School Block Party, a welcome-back soiree with music, food, games, complimentary haircuts and the chance to stock up on free supplies for the upcoming school year.

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"I love it because clothes, shoes and school supplies are so expensive," says Paulo of the annual event.

For Zamila Budhoo, who will be sending her daughters Pooja and Padma off to school, the party represents more than just a festive gathering — it's a vital support system in the face of rising costs for essentials like pencils, backpacks and sneakers.

"For me, I'm a single mom and this is a great help," says Budhoo.

As the back-to-school season approaches, many families are bracing themselves for the financial strain that comes with outfitting their children for a new academic year. From pencils and notebooks to backpacks and calculators, the list of required school supplies can be daunting.

In 2023, American families spent a total of \$41.5 billion on K-12 back-to-school shopping, paying an average of \$890 on clothing, shoes, school supplies and electronics per household, according to the National Retail Federation. This year, spending is expected to soften, but only negligibly, by about \$15 per family.

A growing number of schools, businesses and service organizations are recognizing this burden and stepping up to alleviate some of the pressure by providing school supplies at no cost to students. This effort is helping to not only ease financial stress but also, foster a sense of community.

Schools leading the charge

Some school districts are at the forefront of this initiative. To ensure that all students have the necessary tools, the Schenectady City School District is again providing all elementary and middle school students with basic supplies this academic year using funds appropriated from this year's budget.

Nearby, the Mohonasen Central School District will again provide basic school supplies to all elementary and middle school students to ensure they have the proper tools to succeed this coming school year. At some grade levels, certain items like backpacks and lunchboxes may be excluded, but the district can provide these items on a case-by-case basis.

The Back-to-School Block Party is a little something extra, says Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School principal Kristin Monrett. The school partners with several sponsors, including the City Mission of Schenectady, to host the celebration. It's one-stop shopping to outfit kids and get them excited about the new school year. Monrett says it wouldn't be possible without a matrix of kindness.

"So many people are so willing to help and donate," she says. "There are just good people in the world."

Loren Serritella, clothing lead for the City Mission of Schenectady, spent seven months collecting and organizing more than 4,000 pieces of gently used clothing and 650 pairs of new shoes for the whirlwind event. He won't rack anything that isn't in excellent condition and says he struggles to hold back tears each year.

"It's like planning a wedding," says Serritella, as he floats around the warm gymnasium. "It's crazy for months and then it's over in three hours."

In the Saratoga Springs City School District, the staff at Maple Avenue Middle School are dedicated to supporting students and families throughout the year. They maintain the Kindness Closet, where students can "shop" for clothing, school supplies, and personal care items — such as deodorant, body wash, and feminine products — free of charge.

In 2020, special education instructor Jessica Luttmmer pitched the idea to school leaders after observing a similar program at the Queensbury Central School District. The goal was to create an equitable learning environment where no child feels disadvantaged because of their family's financial situation, says Luttmmer.

"We wanted to provide all kids with access to the day-to-day things they all need," explains Luttmmer. "It helps to provide some equity among students."

The Kindness Closet is organized and managed by members of the school's Student Council, academic advisers and a network of parents. The school-wide effort is supplied with donated items or monetary contributions from the community and local businesses that help fill the closet. The effort has been a tremendous success, she notes, so much so that the Kindness Closet is currently overflowing with supplies and donations as the first day of school draws near.

"People have been really generous," she said. "I get emails all the time from people asking us what we need."

Service organizations making a difference

The effort to outfit kids with everything they need often extends well beyond the classroom. For 22 years, the Junior League of Schenectady and Saratoga County has partnered with teachers at local schools to provide supplies to students through its Operation Back-to-School program.

"We really saw that need out in the community and in 22 years, that need has not gone away at all," says Denise Murphy McGraw, president of the Junior League of Schenectady & Saratoga Counties. "The need has not only grown but spread."

Each year, the women's service organization collects a mass of educational materials — 900 boxes of crayons, 1,000 plastic folders, 3,600 glue sticks, 1,500 boxes of pencils — as part of its annual initiative. Last week, volunteers placed backpacks on all desks at the Wood Road Elementary School in Ballston Spa, each stuffed with everything teachers identified as essential to help all students start the year off on the right foot.

To date, more than 10,500 low-income students have been served by the Junior League, says McGraw. The effort is made possible by the monetary donations from sponsors including the Stewart's Shop Holiday Match, Mohawk Honda and others.

"If we can help any families out there just alleviate that a little bit and not lose sleep over it, then I feel like we've done our job and we've done what we really hoped to do as a community organization that supports women and families," says McGraw.

On Thursday, the Mental Health Empowerment Exchange, a peer-to-peer outreach program that offers mutual support and recovery activities, also hosted a block party in Albany's Arbor Hill neighborhood. Children of all ages could pick out a free backpack stuffed with supplies, get their haircut and enjoy live music, food, face painting and games.

Businesses stepping in

A number of Capital Region businesses are actively embracing corporate social responsibility by hosting school supply drives to bolster this community-wide network of support.

Last week, the Gillis Organization, which owns and operates several McDonald's restaurants locally in the Capital Region, donated more than 200 fully stocked backpacks to local students in Rotterdam.

Nearby, Pioneer employees assembled 183 backpacks with over 4,800 items collected during the past month from the financial services company's 22 branches. These supplies were donated to schools in Rensselaer and Saratoga counties, as well as to the Capital City Rescue Mission, which distributed hundreds of backpacks to local students at its annual Backpack Giveaway Party.

"Low-income families face a challenge at the start of every school year," said Perry Jones, executive director of Capital City Rescue Mission. "With prices of everything going up and up, those families sure could use some help."

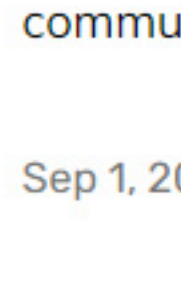
Staff from the United Group of Companies, a Troy-based real estate development and management firm, also partnered with the Capital City Rescue Mission for the first time ever to support the organization's school supply drive.

"As we looked for meaningful ways to give back, we identified a critical need in our own backyard," says Ashley Wysocarski, director of field marketing for the United Group. "In the Albany City School District, 67% of students are economically disadvantaged, facing significant barriers to success. We felt it was not only our responsibility, but also our passion, to leverage our resources and network to support these students."

Every student deserves to feel excited about going to school, adds Wysocarski. The sentiment was infectious, she says. More than 200 residents, community members, businesses, and more contributed. Even visitors touring the company's apartment community were inspired by the effort and gave cash, which allowed team members to purchase even more supplies.

"By giving back in this way, we're not just providing supplies — we're investing in the future," she says. "The outpouring of kindness and commitment from everyone involved has been nothing short of remarkable, and it's a testament to the strength of our community."

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SHANNON FROMMA
STAFF WRITER



Shannon Fromma is a lifelong Capital Region resident currently residing in Wilton with her husband and two rapidly growing children. She received her degree in communications and journalism from the University at Albany in 1999. Before she had a chance to mount her diploma, she accepted a part-time gig writing obituaries for the Times Union. Her role has transformed over the years. Fromma currently pens ShopperTunist, a frugal-living column and award-winning blog. Contact her at sfromma@timesunion.com or 518-454-5340.

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