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Back to school: Cost of supplies a concern in tough times

BY KRISTINA SMITH HORN

Watchdog/enterprise reporter

FREMONT -- Local parents thought budgets were tight when they started back-to-school shopping last year.

That was before the recession deepened, and unemployment soared even higher. Now they're even more strapped to buy pencils, notebooks, crayons and other supplies for the children this fall, said Becky Prasuhn, director of Sandusky County Share and Care.

"I've had a lot of people in here who never thought they would be," she said. "I've had phone calls from people looking for school supplies (which United Way is handling.)"

And they're not alone. The back-to-school budget bind is a national trend, according to the National Retail Federation.

The federation expects Americans to spend \$45 less this year -- \$549 compared to \$594 in 2008 -- on back-to-school items than they did last year. In the past, they had increased their spending every year since 2002.

Eighty-five Americans surveyed -- or four out of five -- said economic woes have forced them to change their spending habits this year. This year, they're browsing sales, buying more generic products and clipping coupons, the federation reported.

Fremont resident Liz Burns shops sales and buys extra supplies for her four children so that they have supplies on hand for the following school year. If she can, she gives some extra supplies to parents who need them.

"If there are 25-cent boxes of crayons, you just pick up a bunch of them," she said. "I'm mostly set for this year already."

For local parents who simply cannot afford to buy those items for the children, United Way is offering help, Prasuhn said.

United Way is providing school supplies to all the elementary schools in Sandusky County, she said. Parents who need help should call the elementary school their child attends and let the staff there know, she said.

Those who are having trouble buying their children back-to-school clothes can visit the Share and Care Center's shop for discounted donated clothes.

The center also will give away new school shoes to county children at the end of August, she said. Meanwhile, some retailers are seeing bright spots despite the downturn in spending.

Sales in electronics, especially laptop and desktop computers, are expected to increase 11 percent this year, according to the federation. Those items are becoming more affordable for most families, the federation reports.

Drugs stores are becoming more popular as they add more product lines. Nearly 22 percent of people surveyed said they would shop for school supplies at drug stores, according to the federation. Walgreens in Fremont, for example, carries all the back-to-school staples -- folders, pencils, etc., store manager Marc Totty said.

"Sales have been very brisk," he said.

Additional Facts

Back to school

Start dates for local school districts:

- **Fremont** -- Sept. 1
 - **Clyde** -- Sept. 2
 - **Bellevue** -- Aug. 25
 - **Gibsonburg** -- Aug. 31
 - **Margaretta** -- Sept. 1
 - **Lakota** -- Sept. 1
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A listing of school supplies for local schools is posted in the aisle at Walgreens in Fremont. (Jonathon Bird | News-Messenger)