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TOP ISSUES

The School-Supply Gap

The high cost of school supplies poses a challenge to many parents and impacts students during back-to-school season and beyond.

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Gail O'Connor

In the two-bedroom apartment Paola Peralta rents above the funeral home where she works in Newark, New Jersey, framed school certificates cover a living room wall.

Paola's two children, Mateo, 13, and Valentina, 11, have received distinctions for honor roll, completing bilingual summer literacy programs and having perfect attendance, and on a recent weekday afternoon, they were getting ready for another school year, sorting colorful supplies into their backpacks.



Paola Peralta and her children, Mateo and Valentina, discuss the high price of school supplies. (All photos by Meron Menghistab.)

Mateo is starting ninth grade at a specialized public vocational high school; he's excited to take engineering and robotics. Valentina, who's entering seventh grade at the neighborhood middle school, is looking forward to her favorite subject, math. Her mother recently bought a new calculator Valentina needs, which came in her favorite color, red. Besides being great students, the siblings are enthusiastic athletes (volleyball for him, soccer for her), and their respective sports medals dangle from hooks on the wall in the tidy bedroom they share, their sides of the room divided by a free-standing rack of clothes on hangers.

Most days, Paola works eight-hour shifts downstairs in the funeral home, tending to tasks in the office, cleaning the viewing rooms, and doing makeup. However, this time of year, in anticipation of the supplies and other things her children will need for school, Paola works shifts that can stretch to 13 hours, and still picks up extra hours on weekends. There are many items to buy on the supply lists distributed by her children's schools: three-ring binders, pencils, pens (red, black, and blue), highlighters, dry-erase markers, Post-It notes, graph paper, index cards, and more.

There also are school uniforms to purchase. Paola bought Valentina's maroon polo shirt oversized last year, so it will last through another grade. To meet the strict dress code at his high school, Mateo needs all new clothes, including shirts, pants, a gym uniform, and a sharp blazer, which will total \$250.

The priciest single item on Mateo's list—a graphing calculator—gave Paola pause. She contacted a math-teacher friend in her home country of Ecuador to ask if Mateo would need the specific model listed, or if he could get by in algebra with something less expensive. Advised to get the calculator, Paola paid the \$130 for it. “It is an investment. That's why I'm working, for them,” she says.

Between the two children, Paola has spent close to \$700 on her debit card—so far. The kids' supply lists note that specific teachers may require additional supplies in the first weeks of the school year.



Mateo shows his array of school supplies just before the 2019-20 school year begins.

Meron Menghistab

‘A Couple of Mortgage or Rent Payments’

The \$700 Paola has spent puts her right at the national average (\$696.70) of what American parents were estimated to spend during the back-to-school season this year, according to the National Retail Federation. Such costs threaten to overwhelm many families with lower incomes, and with the growing expectation that kids will have access to technology at home, some cost projections are even higher.

[The Huntington Backpack Index](#), an annual barometer of school-supply and related expenses, developed in collaboration with Communities In Schools, a national nonprofit supporting at-risk students in K-12 public schools, estimated what parents could expect to pay this year per child:

- \$1,017 for elementary school supplies, extracurricular fees, and technology
- \$1,277 for middle school supplies, extracurricular fees, and technology

- \$1,668 for high school supplies, extracurricular fees, and technology

“When you’re talking about, even at a low end, \$1,000 out of pocket, for really any family it’s quite an expense, and if you think about our families who are living at the poverty line or below, this is really significant,” says Heather Clawson, Ph.D., chief program and innovation officer at [Communities in Schools](#). “Many families are not single-child households. They have multiple children, so compound that cost by two, three, or four kids spanning across K through 12, you’re talking about a couple of mortgage or rent payments potentially, and money that would otherwise pay for food or to pay the electric bill.”

For students whose families cannot afford supplies, coming to school unprepared can create social and emotional challenges, in addition to putting kids at a disadvantage for learning.

“Once you start getting into third grade and on up, and definitely for middle school students in particular, they often don’t want to ask for help—they’re embarrassed, and how adults respond to that in the school and in the classroom can make a very big difference in how that student feels and how they show up,” Heather says. “Our students have a sense of pride and they don’t want to admit they couldn’t afford school supplies and that they don’t have what they need. That results in students not doing assignments, not being prepared, and not being able to participate. They often withdraw and feel isolated, and this is compounded over time.”

School-supply drives can help defray some of the cost, but they alone aren’t an answer. “If there isn’t a way to inform parents about these opportunities, they’re really not as helpful as we think they are,” Heather says, adding that school supply shopping is not a “one and done”: “We often see these drives at the beginning of the school year, but what happens midway through the year is students need more supplies or are running low. We all want to be Good Samaritans and donate and volunteer our time, but the reality is this is a pervasive problem.”

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Heather Clawson, Ph.D

Chief Program and Innovation Officer, Communities in Schools

The Burden on Teachers

In addition to students, this school-supply gap places an unfair burden on another group: teachers. “We already know our teachers are underpaid and don’t have spare cash laying around, yet they often have to come out of pocket to provide for their students,” Heather says.

Ninety-three percent of public school teachers spend their own money on school supplies without reimbursement, and on average, teachers spend \$479 on items for their classrooms, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

Teachers are in a unique position to either add to a student’s feelings of inadequacy or be sensitive to the mental burden that comes from financial insecurity. “It’s often seen as a behavioral issue if a student doesn’t show up with their pencil or their notebook or hasn’t turned in an assignment that needed to be submitted electronically, because they didn’t have internet at home,” Heather says. “And it’s really important for adults to sort of pause, and really understand students and the conditions that they are faced with, and that we show compassion for our students.”

Making It Work

To scour the best deals, Paola makes trips to separate stores, usually Staples and Walmart. Sometimes, a neighborhood will hold a local school supply drive. At one such drive in a nearby park, Paola picked up crayons and colored pencils, loose-leaf paper, and notebooks. She stores the items that don’t align with the school list in two drawers in the living room for future use, or the kids give them to classmates who doesn’t have any supplies. Paola donates what she can to others in need as well, such as when a local family suffered a home fire.

This year, Mateo will be getting a school-issued Chromebook, which he’s allowed to take home. He’d like a new backpack, the kind with a space dedicated for a laptop, but that will

have to wait. “The ones that they already have are still working. So I said, ‘For next time,’ because I don’t have money,” Paola says.

Pooling Supplies

The burden that the cost of school supplies can place on a family is a familiar story around the country. “When they get the supply list from school, parents bring it in and ask what is essential,” says Alejandro Amaya (Dallas-Ft. Worth ‘15), a fifth-grade math and science teacher at Leonides Gonzalez Cigarroa, M.D. Elementary School in Dallas. He adds he feels fortunate to work at a school with strong parental support.

Alejandro, who came to the U.S. with his younger brother and parents from Mexico when he was in fourth grade, recalls his parents asking teachers the same question. His family shopped at different stores to get the cheapest brands possible and picked up whatever they could at school-supply drives at their church. “For that month of August there was just making some hard choices in either getting the school supplies or other regular monthly necessities,” Alejandro says. “As a teacher, I see my students’ parents facing the exact same situation, and I can’t help but feel like the needle has not moved forward much in 20 years.”

To make supplies accessible to everyone in the class, Alejandro pools the supplies that come in from his students. He lets students keep anything of their own that is extra-special to them, such as crayons or colored pencils, while he puts out a full box of crayons and markers he buys for the class with his materials stipend. Sometimes Alejandro has to explain to parents why he shares with the entire class the materials they worked hard to buy, while also thanking them for contributing.

“We just want to make sure everyone has what they need for school,” Alejandro says. “It would be a shame if a student feels they can’t learn or they feel left out, because their parents can’t afford pencils or markers or crayons or glue sticks.

“It’s an issue that doesn’t get a lot of attention, and [getting supplies] is something that many people assume automatically happens, when it’s definitely a struggle that we’re not naming and a lot of families are suffering because of it,” Alejandro adds.

Taking the Pressure Off Families

Futuro Academy Charter School in Las Vegas takes an innovative approach to this problem: The three-year-old school does not distribute supply lists. “We highly recommend all our students have a backpack, so they can carry their homework folder inside, and this folder is provided by the school,” says kindergarten teacher Sylvia Espinoza (Las Vegas Valley ‘12). If parents can’t acquire a backpack, or it starts to fall apart mid-year, the school can provide one that’s been donated by other generous families, staff, or members of the community.

Students wear uniforms; the first shirt is offered for free by the school, while pants and any additional shirts need to be purchased by families. Futuro provides all other basic supplies —like pencils, notebooks, and paper. “This way we’re not putting economic pressure on our families, and really having them only focus on working with their students academically,” Sylvia says.

While schools, teachers, and families do what they can to narrow the school-supply gap, there is still a long way to go. “We talk about public education and our tax dollars paying for free education for all students, but clearly getting an education is not free,” Heather, from Communities in Schools, says. “There are costs associated with it that we don’t often really think about, and we don’t think about the implications of those costs for lower-income families.”

She adds: “There’s obviously a much bigger societal problem, one we need to address.”

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