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**HEADLINE: Groups bridging gap on back-to-school spending**



## **Groups bridging gap on back-to-school spending**

By D. Aileen Dodd

Tight economic times for schools and families present challenges to those struggling to equip students for learning.

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New backpacks, graphing calculators and flash drives for one kid or a classroom — the costs can be daunting to those on a limited budget.

Poverty will likely impact back-to-school sales even with incentives like the tax-free holiday as families face foreclosures and unemployment.

About 18 percent of children under 18 live below the poverty level in Georgia, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Georgia ranks among the worst in homelessness among school kids, with nearly 58,400 students experiencing homelessness each year, federal data reported to The *National Center on Family Homelessness* shows.

“This is a very hard time for homeless kids,” said Dr. Ellen Bassuk, president of the Massachusetts-based center on homelessness. “In many cases they don’t get the appropriate things they need to go out and try to do well.”

According to the National Retail Federation, even middle class families will be pinching pennies.

“The economy is playing a big role in families’ back-to-school spending plans this year, which means that first and foremost they will look for sales,” said Kathy Grannis, National Retail Federation spokeswoman. “They will even assess what items their children can do without by using last year’s supplies or apparel.”

A federation survey reports that the average amount spent on back-to-school items by a family with kids in K-12 on school purchases will drop from about \$594 in 2008 to \$548 this school year, a decrease of about 7.7 percent.

But many families will have far less to spend.

Churches, community groups, retailers and realtors are stepping up to stand in the gap.

Keller Williams Realty Atlanta partners hosted a “Kares for Kids” drive collecting 1,000 new backpacks filled with supplies donated by realtors and their supporters.

Staples office supply stores throughout Georgia are collecting school supplies through their Do Something 101 campaign.

PayPal teamed up with DonorsChoose.org to allow its back-to-school customers to buy wish-list items online for metro Atlanta classrooms.

In addition to supplies, some are helping with other back-to-school needs.

Good Samaritan Health Center of Gwinnett will be offering low cost back-to-school health screenings for those who lack insurance. “About one out of every five children in Georgia are without insurance,” said Mary Thomason, development director for the health center. “There are a lot of families in need.”

And at Ivy Preparatory Academy, a charter school struggling on a slim budget in Norcross, an army of more than 50 volunteers came in the weeks before school to tidy up the place.

“We were doing landscaping .... we cut grass, put down pine straw, we did painting, we also cleaned the carpets,” said Zachary Pratt, a Salem Missionary Baptist Church member and a member of the Truth and Union Lodge No. 594 of the Prince Hall Masons of Gwinnett County, among the volunteers. “It is something that they really needed ... so when these young ladies come to school on Aug. 3, they will come to a clean environment.”

Help with back-to-school supplies Aug. 1 Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church Family & Friends Day; picnic, health screenings, canned food and school supplies give-away for needy families in Gwinnett. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the church, 182 Hunter St., Norcross. 770-448-5475

Destiny Metropolitan Worship Church Back 2 School Event; backpack giveaways, haircuts and more. 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., 1775 Water Place, S.E., Atlanta. 770- 916-0454

Aug. 5 Good Samaritan Health Center of Gwinnett; health screenings and immunizations from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.; up to \$45 for complete package. 3700 Club Drive, Lawrenceville. 678-280-6630

Aug. 6 Good Samaritan Health Center of Gwinnett; health screenings and immunizations from 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.; up to \$45 for complete package. 678-280-6630

Aug 7 Back-To-School Backpack Giveaway; 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., Agape Community Center, 2353 Bolton Road, N.W., Atlanta. 04-355-1877

Aug. 8 Salem Missionary Baptist Church Summer Blast Expo and school supplies giveaway; 4 to 8 p.m., admission is two cans of food, 351 Killian Hill Road, Lilburn. 770-856-5574.

Norcross Cooperative Ministry Backpack Giveaway; 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Norcross Co-op is accepting donations of school supplies (in need of paper, pencils, folders, bookbags) or money and food to help needy Norcross students. 2275 Mitchell Road. 770-263-0013.

All next week Supplies and other help will be distributed by Lilburn Cooperative Ministry at 5329 Five Forks

Trickum Road. Lilburn Co-op is in need of graphing paper, composition notebooks, highlighters, pens, pocket folders, color pencil and markers. It is also accepting donations of money. For service dates and times, call 770-931-8333.

Other support PayPal: Customers can shop online with PayPal and direct their savings to the wish lists of metro Atlanta classrooms. [www.paypal.com/makeitcount](http://www.paypal.com/makeitcount)

Staples: Office supply stores are collecting school supplies through Sept. 19 to help needy students and classrooms. Donors can learn more about it on Facebook or by visiting [www.dosomething.org](http://www.dosomething.org).

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