Stretching the dollar at back-to-school time

K-State extension agent encourages families to budget for increased expenses that come with the beginning of the school year

By Lisa Moser, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Back-to-school time can be both exciting and overwhelming as kids and their parents anticipate the opportunities and uncertainties of the year ahead. It can also be a time when families feel additional financial pressures with the school fees that include textbook costs and lunch account deposits along with classroom supply requests and the children's need for clothing and athletic shoes.

So how can parents reduce their stress by maximizing their dollars? Joy Miller, a K-State Research and Extension family and consumer wellness agent in Johnson County, has some ideas to consider.

“A great place to start looking for school supplies is to see what you have in the house that was left over from the last school year and compare that to the school list for the year ahead,” Miller said.

She also said that many of those old supplies that aren’t able to be used in school still have value as part of a homework station or refilling office supplies in the home.

When shopping, she encourages families to compare prices on items to maximize sales.

“Look to see what is available in the stores and then comparison shop to see where the best deals are,” Miller said.

If buying all the supplies at once is putting a financial strain on the budget, she encourages families to prioritize items on the list.

“General classroom supplies can be donated over the first few weeks of school so that you are still contributing to the supply, but you are prioritizing the immediate needs of items such as pencils and crayons,” Miller said.
Along with school supplies, many families are also assessing the children’s wardrobe and filling in the gaps, Miller said.

“First, go through the child’s closet to see what they’ve outgrown or won’t wear anymore and then make a list of clothes that need to be purchased at this time,” Miller said.

She added that many of the fall clothing purchases can be postponed until a time when the weather starts to change.

“Secondhand stores or garage sales can also be a way to add unique and good-value pieces to the wardrobe, allowing kids to have a combination of both new and repurposed clothing,” Miller said.

Just as with school supplies, Miller encourages families to make a list of the clothing needs for each child and then set a budget.

“This is a great time to talk with your kids about what is a want versus what is a need and communicating the spending limits to help them understand the thought process of budgeting,” Miller said.

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