

How to save on school supplies by tapping your community

By Laura McMullen of Nerdwallet | AP

August 3, 2022 at 9:28 a.m. EDT

It's that time again: back to school, back to spending so much money on supplies. And this year, families will have to shell out even more than usual because of inflation.

Thankfully, you can still save money on supplies and other gear by leaning on local parents, neighbors and community members. Here's how.

BUY IN BULK, THEN SPLIT THE COSTS

You know who else is buying the same supplies you need? The parents of your kid's classmates. So join forces.

Buy certain supplies in bulk if the cost per unit is less than that of a smaller pack. Then split those supplies among other caregivers, so each person pays less than if they had gone solo.

Buying in bulk is a smart strategy for more general items typically found on classroom lists. These could include facial tissues, disinfecting wipes, plastic storage bags, paper towels and sanitizers, says Charles Field, CEO of [TeacherLists](#), a digital platform that enables teachers to upload supply lists, which retailers and parents can access.

Say your kid is supposed to bring hand sanitizer. One 12-ounce bottle could cost \$16. But buy a four-pack for \$36, and four people could each spend \$9 per bottle.

Also try this method for harder-to-get and more expensive items, says Maggie Klokkenga, a Morton, Illinois-based certified financial planner and owner of Make a Money Mindshift, through which she coaches clients on their cash flow.

Say that fine-tipped dry-erase markers are tough to find. Rather than multiple parents searching empty shelves and paying a premium — collaborate.

Klokkenga, a parent of three school-age kids, has tips for coordinating to save on supplies. "It does require some behind-the-scenes organizing," she says.

First, keep the number of people involved to under 10, she suggests, “before it gets a little hairy.” Gauge interest before proceeding. Next, compare prices on those items you want to split. Amazon is a safe bet for everyday essentials, she says, but office supply stores can be promising for large orders of classroom-specific items.

Finally, tell parents how much the cost will be per person and request that payment. Buy the products only after everyone has paid. After purchasing the items, arrange a pickup.

REACH OUT TO COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Don't want to coordinate that kind of effort? Klokkenga suggests tapping existing groups.

Call your public library, local community center or place of worship to ask if they're leading a back-to-school supply drive. If not, consider making the case for one.

For example, if there are several school-age kids who attend your place of worship, ask leaders to organize a fundraiser for school supplies.

“See if they can help be a partner, so to speak, in both the administration of it and in getting some money,” Klokkenga says.

Make sure to mention how inflation has driven up these costs for many of the group's participants, she adds.

GET SECONDHAND GEAR FROM LOCAL MARKETS

Using pre-owned supplies and clothes is both eco-friendly and usually cheaper than buying new. The secondhand route is best for reusable items, such as clothes, backpacks and lunch boxes, says Kari Lorz, a Salem, Oregon-based certified financial education instructor and founder of Money for the Mamas, a website devoted to helping mothers learn about money.

However, Field points out that buying used is riskier for supplies that can wear down without you knowing, like ink pens.

As for where to find used stuff, Lorz recommends the Buy Nothing Project. According to its website, this movement includes thousands of local communities hosted on Facebook and the BuyNothing app. In these groups, members request and give away stuff for free.

Lorz frequents her local Buy Nothing group. She says it would be fine for a new member who hadn't previously given away anything to make requests. “There's nobody keeping tally,” she says.

You may also find free or discounted items in other local, online spaces, such as Facebook Marketplace, Nextdoor and Craigslist.

For in-person shopping, seek out yard sales, garage sales and thrift stores.

CREATE A CARPOOL

Whether you have to haul kids to school or to extracurricular activities, high gas prices will hurt. So try organizing a carpool with nearby families.

Sharing driving duty is kind to the Earth, your wallet and — as Klokkenga points out — you. “When somebody else picks up your kid, you just gained 10 to 15 more minutes of time,” she says.

And when it's your turn to drive, she says, you can learn more about your kid and their classmates. “It promotes conversation,” she says. “Lots of times, you're finding out more about what's going on.”

This article was provided to The Associated Press by the personal finance website NerdWallet. Laura McMullen is a writer at NerdWallet. Email: lmcmullen@nerdwallet.com. Twitter: [@lauraemcmullen](https://twitter.com/lauraemcmullen).

RELATED LINKS:

NerdWallet: How to save money: 22 proven ways <https://bit.ly/nerdwallet-how-to-save-money-22-proven-ways>

TeacherLists: Find your back-to-school supply list <https://www.teacherlists.com/content/parents/>