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Sports

Retailers lure strapped parents with stuff that's COOL FOR SCHOOL

Stores go all out for back-to-school boost

Nathan Hurst / The Detroit News

Forget the yesteryear yellow pencils and plain pink erasers.

After disappointing sales early this summer, retailers in Metro Detroit and nationwide are stocking shelves with the latest extravagant arsenal of back-to-school goodies, all part of a fevered attempt to get customers back to the cash registers with wallets open wide.

State-of-the-art school gear includes loose-leaf binders with built-in MP3 player docks and speakers. Other merchants offer calling cards for teens, which can be imprinted with the photo and contact information of social butterflies -- including MySpace and instant-messaging screen names.

While merchants say they expect a better-than-ever season this year, continued economic pressures in Michigan likely will dampen sales here, analysts said.

Nationwide, parents are expected to buy a record \$54.2 billion worth of school and dorm supplies this year, according to estimates from the National Retail Federation, a national trade group in Washington, D.C.

About \$18.4 billion of that outpouring will go toward clothing and supplies for elementary, middle and high school-aged students, according to the group. That averages out to \$563.49 per family.

But families in Michigan are likely to spend at least \$100 less than that, on average, according to Ken Dalto, a retail consultant in Farmington Hills.

While consumers throughout the United

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety scissors and changing color glue sticks Rolling backpacks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social networking cards Brightly colored, sometimes squishy alternatives Couture bags

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States share woes like a slumping housing market and high fuel and grocery prices, Dalto said discretionary spending here has been curbed more severely by worries about potential layoffs and jitters over continued auto industry struggles.

"Families who are feeling the bite from everything that's been going wrong lately aren't going to shell out for their kids right now," he said. "They're much more likely to wait for Christmas."

'Just the basics'

Some Metro Detroit parents shopping last week said back-to-school lists will be leaner than in past years.

Ciana Smith, 27, said her two sons, entering first and third grades in September, will have to make do with the simplest of supplies.

"Just the basics," the Detroiter said as she perused the aisles at the Staples store on East Jefferson. "I'd love to get them something a little more, but money is tight."

Smith is not alone, but that isn't stopping retailers from pushing a bevy of flashy school "necessities."

Staples is offering up an extensive, multi-brand line of souped-up school supplies this year.

"The big thing we're pushing this year is personalization," said Katie Sullivan, company spokeswoman. "There are a lot of ways kids can make their school experience their own."

And kids wanting to take charge of their schoolyard style certainly have options -- if Mom and Dad have the means.

The touted must-haves this year include squishy, rubber-covered calculators in hues aplenty. Also popular are cutting and pasting sets from makers such as Crayola that make old-school rubber-handled safety scissors look positively antiquated.

Retailers offer deals

Retailers such as Staples are confident some parents will be willing to pay for extras, but others are saying they're being more mindful of the financial pinch hitting many families.

Price-slashing mammoth Wal-Mart has said it will again push its value-centric approach to back-to-school shopping this year, offering deals like \$5 backpacks throughout the next month.

Meijer, based in Grand Rapids, is also looking to reel in customers with deals, especially on clothing and dorm supplies for the college set.

Dalto said clothing, accessories and shoes will dominate back-to-school spending, though in some cases stricter school rules on acceptable attire may curb purchases of flashy or overly fashion-forward wardrobes for many young students.

For families pinching pennies this summer, any move toward simplicity is welcome.

"I'd rather get them just what they need now and save the money for a special Christmas later," Smith said. "I don't feel bad because I know they're not the only ones."

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