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EDUCATION

Vail Valley families struggle to buy school supplies

Yearly donations help, but teachers often buy supplies with their own money

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EAGLE COUNTY, Colorado — Back-to-school shopping is a more important ritual than you might think, says Suzanne Fast, a teacher at June Creek Elementary.

When kids walk through the aisles of erasers, pens, markers and notebooks with their parents, they become just a little more excited about going back to class.

“You’re more invested if you bring your own things and take your time to go down the aisle with your family,” Fast said. “Those kids are so much more prepared than kids whose parents say, ‘Oh, it’s the first day, let’s drop you off.’”

The problem is that so many families can’t afford to buy a year’s worth of school supplies for their kids.

Every year, there’s always a scramble among teachers and principals to make sure kids have enough pens, paper, pencils, folder and notebooks to get them through school. Some students show up without anything, others maybe only half of what they need. They’ll need new supplies around Christmas time.

“We often have families who come in asking for support because they can’t afford it,” said Heidi Hanssen, principal at Edwards Elementary.

Melisa Rewold-Thuon, principal at Avon Elementary, said the schools usually has some leftover supplies from the previous school year, and those usually come in handy. Avon Elementary tries to get out its supply lists as early as possible, so thrifty parents can spend the entire summer looking for sales, she said.

During the school year, teachers usually end up spending their “classroom budgets” on basic things like folders and spiral notebooks for the kids, Rewold-Thuon said.

Fast takes a communal approach to supplies in her classroom. All the supplies students bring is put in a big pot, and everyone takes what they need throughout the year. She doesn’t want students feeling ostracized because they don’t have what the other students have.

If supplies gets low, Fast and other teachers like to communicate with parents through newsletters, letting them know the Kleenex and crayons are running out. If the class runs out of markers, they’ll use colored pencils for a project.

Most teachers are pretty flexible, but inevitably, most teachers end up spending their own money to help out, Fast said.

How much you spend on supplies really depends on the family, Hanssen said.

“We have lots of students that are living in poverty and they come with a much different set of school supplies than our higher socioeconomic families,” Hanssen said.

Schools also get a lot of help from charities and donations. School supplies collected in drives will help supplement schools throughout the year,

Rewold-Thuon said.

The Cordillera Motorcycle Club is buying every bit of school supplies, including new backpacks, for all the first graders at Edwards Elementary and Avon Elementary, costing more than \$4,000. Last year, Costco donated about 300 backpackers to the schools, Rewold-Thuon said.

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