

Supply lines

Parents, students rush to get outfitted for school

BY AILEEN WINGBLAD
SPECIAL WRITER

Crisp new notebooks . . . sharpened pencils . . . clean, bright backpacks . . . lunch boxes. If you're a parent, these are the true signs that summer is coming to an end.

Ready or not, it's back-to-school time again.

Of course, if you've shopped at any local stores lately, you've probably noticed that plenty of folks have already begun stocking up on this year's school supplies, leaving the shelves and aisles in near-total disarray as they search for gear to help their youngsters start another year with some semblance of order and neatness.

"Organization is really important, and there are so many products out there these days to get the kids organized," said Pam Schneider, who was shopping recently at the Farmington Hills Target store for school supplies for her three sons.

"We like the 'Tropper Keepers' . . . and they go through a ton of the (theme) notebooks. I look for durability and a good price," she said.

Fellow Target shopper Charity Jones agreed as she checked the shelves for items for her three children. "I'm looking for the cheaper prices, but convenience and keeping the kids organized at school are big things, too," she said.

Popular lunch carriers

Some of the newfangled or specialty products include the all-in-one type notebook/binders with built-in covers and backpacks with attachable matching lunch holders.

Soft-side lunch carriers are gaining in popularity, too, and more folks say they are choosing canvas or leather backpacks, rather than the usual vinyl, for better wear.

Yet it's "the basics" — loose-



Stocking up: Emily Nacy (left) chooses school supplies with her sister Katie Nacy (back to camera); their babysitter, Anita Kulin; and Kulin's daughter Samantha at the Farmington Hills Target store.

leaf paper, theme books, notepads, pencils, markers and the like — that bring most people in to the store, especially if there is a sale, according to Target manager Chris George.

"Business is great right now. In fact, I think (the back-to-school rush) hit a little earlier this year, probably a few weeks ago," he said.

"But we are having advertised sales and people really can't go wrong," he said.

Calculators are hot

Over at the Troy Kmart, there is plenty of back-to-school shopping going on, according to merchandise manager Cindy Berta.

"Our prices are really good this year, and I'd say we've been set up since mid-July," she said. Berta agreed that the basic school supplies are the top sellers, as well as the smallest calculators for the older elementary students. She particularly likes the soft lunch kits, which contain juice

box holders, especially because of their flexibility.

"Remember when we were kids and our lunch boxes would get all dented up and our moms would yell about it? These soft ones are a great idea — and they are very popular, too," she said.

Also big sellers as back-to-school season approaches — most likely for college students having to deal with limited living space — are closet organizers and plastic crates, Berta added.

"These can really work well when you don't have a lot of room but want to be organized. Of course, just about everybody likes to at least start out the school year organized, right?"

When it comes to back-to-school time, Berta is among the most experienced: She does the "shopping" for an entire school.

For the second year in a row, as part of a cooperative effort at Birmingham's Pembroke Elementary, Berta has worked with Pembroke teacher aide Mary Mellor to

fill orders for the school's "back-to-school-supplies school store."

School has own store

Pembroke is among a handful of area schools setting up a mini-supply shop in the gymnasium stocked with all sorts of papers, markers, backpacks, lunch kits, crayons, pencils and just about anything else the teachers have requested.

Parents can do their shopping right at the school. The store is open the week prior to the beginning of school. Parents can obtain a supply list at the school, make their purchases and avoid the frenzy many other parents go through in the back-to-school rush.

"Parents can pick up everything they need in one brief stop. I call it 'ainless shopping,'" said Mellor, who organizes the store on a volunteer basis for the school.

Mellor said that the prices are competitive as well. Since Kmart gives them a discount, the school is able to mark items up slightly and use the profits as a school contribution. Mellor said she stays away from flashy items for the store and doesn't "cater to styles," following advice from Pembroke's principal.

"And we do have assorted patterns for lunch boxes and backpacks and all, but we try not to select things that are too juvenile. This is a great service to the families," she added, estimating that close to 75 percent of the school's families make some purchases at the store.

And starting the year off right with the proper supplies is a definite advantage, Mellor said.

"If students are enthusiastic about their new things they will take better care of them, and hopefully that attitude will trickle down into their school work. It's important for them to start off on the right foot with the right stuff and with the right expectations," she said.

Overseas trip for treatment pays off for local youngster

BY BILL COULTANT
STAFF WRITER

Vanessa Wells went back to school Tuesday with a story to tell her classmates at William Grace Elementary and a chance at a longer, healthier life than she had before her trip to Germany in May.

Vanessa, who will be 9 on Sept. 8, traveled with her mother, Mary, to Hanover, Germany, May 20-30 to receive treatment from Dr. Hans Nieper, a specialist in Friedrich's ataxia, a rare nerve disorder.

The girl had been diagnosed with the disease. But after repeated tests and visits to neurologists in the United States, the Wells family was told there was little that could be done.

But through a Livonia family whose sons have survived the degenerative disease well past their teens, Mary heard of the German doctor and his treatments for the disease.

She and her family raised money for the trip and the medical procedures, which are not approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration in this country.

"It really went well," Mary said of the trip and the treatment. "She (Vanessa) was really good on the plane and excited about the trip."

Nieper, who also works with people who have multiple sclerosis, decided not to give the pregarulous Vanessa injections but instead prescribed medications to go along with her physical therapy.

"She is stronger and her walking is steadier," Mary Wells said.

The mother of three said the doctor advised her to be patient about results from the treatments and report back within a year. In the meanwhile, Vanessa will be taking medications that have to be renewed every three months.

Mary Wells said she was happily surprised to find that many American families are using Nieper's treatment.

"When we were in the waiting room, all the other people were



Worth the trip: Mary Wells and her daughter Vanessa are happy they made the trip to Hanover, Germany, in May, to seek treatment for a rare nerve disease. The almost 9-year-old girl started school this week with a brighter future.

Americans," Wells said. "It was nice because we had a common bond."

Since the treatment, which is recognized in Germany, is not recognized here and therefore not covered by insurance, the family had to raise money for the trip and the treatments. But now that Vanessa is reacting well to the treatments, her mother thinks the biggest financial drain may be over.

"We probably won't have to go back there," she said.

The rare disease usually claims its victim's lives during their teen years. And the progress of the two Livonia brothers, including one who is in his 30s and doing fine, and the strength her daughter has shown since beginning treatments this spring are encouraging.

"The doctor said it would stabilize her condition," she said. "And we think she may improve."

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