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Notebooks and pencils and backpacks – oh my!

With back-to-school comes a long list of supplies to buy, everything from clothes to crayons. Here's a lesson in savings: There are deals to be had if you know where and when to shop.

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Eight pencils for one penny? Fifty cents for a three-ring binder? One dollar for hardcover books?



Ruth Libby of Ruth's Reusable Resources stands surrounded by stocked shelves in her public store, where she will sell surplus items or supplies that teachers don't need.

Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

Yes, deals on school supplies are out there, if you know where to look. And if you know when to look.

"There are lots of deals right at your local stores -- Staples, Walmart -- if you look hard enough," said Ruth Libby, who runs Ruth's Reusable Resources, a Portland store that gives supplies from various sources to teachers for a nominal charge to their school district. "And you have to think about buying when school's already begun, because stores will be trying to get rid of stuff, just like after-Christmas sales."

Libby points to Staples, which runs weekly one-cent sales on school supplies in July and August, as a place to get deals. Each week, the store advertises several items you can get for a penny, after a \$5 purchase, including two-pocket folders or an eight-pack of pencils.

Walmart also has a lot of low-price specials on school supplies at various times leading up to the start of school, including 25 cents for a 24-pack of Crayola Crayons.

Being aware of these types of specials is helpful in saving money on school supplies, as is shopping at several different stores. Two new stores that opened in Greater Portland are worth a trip for back-to-school shoppers.

One is the new public store at Ruth's, on Blueberry Road in Portland, which opened earlier this year. The store sells items that teachers don't need, or that the teacher store has too much of, said Libby.

So there are three-ring binders for 50 cents to \$2, hardcover storybooks for \$1, and 2-inch bundles of loose white paper for \$1.50.

The store also has lots of arts-and-crafts supplies, including pieces of plastic, metal and foam.

Another new place for back-to-school shopping is the new 2,700-square-foot Goodwill store in the former Circuit City building near the Maine Mall. Like most Goodwill stores, it has lots of used clothing and accessories at very low prices.

And here's a little secret, according to Goodwill communications director Michelle Smith: The items are on a five-week rotation. When they get displayed in the store, they get a different-colored tag depending on the week they come in. Then, in five weeks, if an item is still there, it's half-off, she said.

So if you see a backpack with a red tag that's \$10, come back the week all red tags are half-off and get it for \$5.



Binders on sale at Ruth's public store.

Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

Plus, Smith said, this year Goodwill is also selling new school supplies, such as notebooks, so that people who come in for back-to-school clothes or backpacks can get essentials without going elsewhere.

"This time of year, we try to be well-stocked with kids' clothes, backpacks and things people need for school," said Smith. "And by offering some new supplies too, we hope to offer one-stop shopping."

Maine has 19 Goodwill stores. They, along with other used clothing and consignment stores, are good places to consider for back-to-school shopping.

Another thing to consider when back-to-school shopping is that sometimes paying a little more now means paying less in the long run. Consider these suggestions from Maine parents:

- Buy an L.L. Bean backpack instead of one at a discount store. It will usually last much longer, and Bean is known for fixing its backpacks if a zipper breaks or something rips.
- Buy colored pencils rather than crayons. They are more durable, break less and last longer.
- Shop at outlets of brands known for quality clothing -- L.L. Bean and J. Crew in Freeport come to mind. You can often get low prices at the outlets, and those brands will usually outlast clothes from a discount store.

- And finally, as Libby recommends, don't feel you have to buy everything your child needs before school starts.

"Watch for the sales in September, because everything will be reduced," said Libby. "You can always buy something and save it for when school starts next year."

THRIFTY BUSINESS

SOME NEW PLACES, just opened this year, to check out for inexpensive back-to-school supplies, from paper and binders to clothes or backpacks:

- Ruth's Reusable Resources public store, 39 Blueberry Road, Portland. www.ruths.org; 699-5565
- Goodwill Store, 555 Maine Mall Road (former location of Circuit City), South Portland. www.goodwillnne.org; 553-2223

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