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Back-To-School Spending Is Up And So Are Parents' Expectations

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JLL's 2026 Back-to-School Shopping Report reveals budgets are growing, but parents are redefining what value looks like in today's retail environment.
GETTY

Last year, one of the biggest questions on retailers' minds was whether they should brace for an unusually early back-to-school shopping season. High inflation and lingering inventory concerns meant nobody wanted to be without the products families needed. This year, the outlook is a little different.

JLL's 2026 Back-to-School Shopping Report suggests that families are settling into a new shopping rhythm. According to the survey of more than 1,000 parents, budgets are still growing, but consumers are becoming more deliberate about how—and where—they spend, and gravitating toward retailers that make the process easier.

In many ways, this indicates a healthier retail environment. The retailers that recognize this shift and adjust their merchandising, timing, and customer experience accordingly will be best positioned as the season unfolds.

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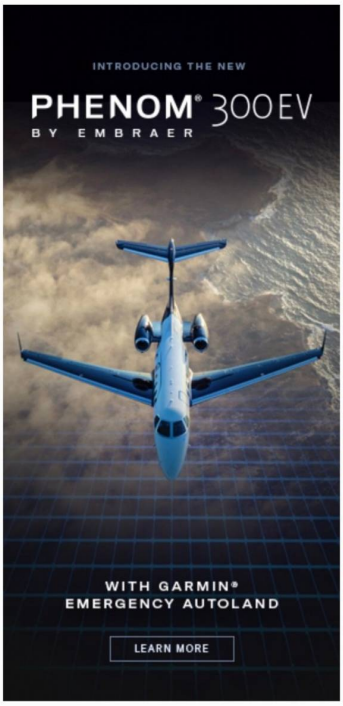

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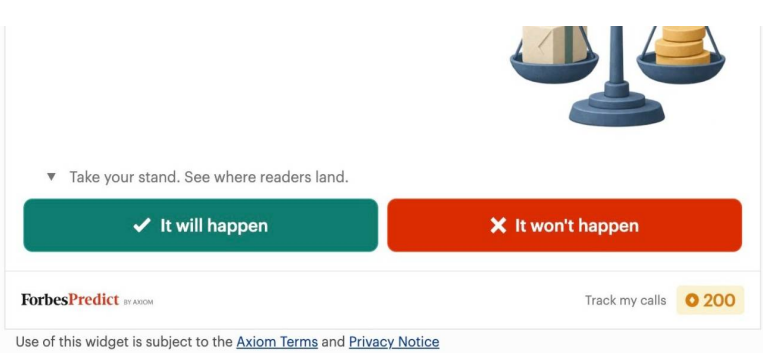

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Budgets are up, but the surge is cooling

Back-to-school budgets continue to climb, with parents planning to spend an average of $489 per child this year—11.7% more than last year. The more meaningful shift isn't the size of the budget, but who's spending, what they're buying and how they're choosing to shop.

Higher-income households led last year's spending surge, but middle-income families are driving much of this year's growth. Gen Z and Millennial parents continue to spend the most, while Boomer-aged parents—often shopping for older or college-age children—remain the only generation planning to spend less than last year.

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Clothing accounts for the largest share of back-to-school spending, followed by electronics and home furnishings—but the motivations behind those purchases vary. Clothing, school supplies, and backpacks are annual purchases for nearly every family—while electronics, textbooks, and dorm furnishings reflect a different shopping needs. Fewer parents buy them, but those who do often spend considerably more as they prepare older students for high school or college.

For retailers, that distinction matters. The strongest back-to-school destinations are equipped to serve both the family replacing everyday essentials and the one making larger, milestone purchases.

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Inflation worries increase

Inflation and broader economic uncertainty are still influencing purchasing decisions as nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of parents say inflation will influence how they shop this season—remarkably consistent from 65.2% last year. Affluent parents—who led concern last year—have become considerably less worried as lower-income households now report the greatest financial pressure.

Even as overall spending increases, parents are becoming more selective. Discretionary purchases now account for a smaller share of the average back-to-school budget than

they did a year ago. Retailers should resist treating "value" as a single message, understanding that value can mean anything from promotions and private-label alternatives to the convenience of finding everything in one place or confidence that the products they need will be available.

Parents are shopping later—with purpose

One of the biggest shifts from last year is when parents plan to shop. If early panic-buying dominated 2025, this year is easing back into a more traditional rhythm. Just 36.7% of parents said they expect to begin shopping before June, down from 44.8% a year ago, while July has reemerged as the season's busiest shopping month.

Early shopping hasn't disappeared entirely. Parents preparing students for high school or college still tend to start sooner because purchases like laptops, textbooks, and dorm furnishings require more planning. Those shoppers are also more likely to comparison shop and visit multiple retailers.

This year, early shopping is driven more by logistics than anxiety. Retailers who align promotions and merchandising with those different shopping timelines open more opportunities to connect with families at the moment they're ready to buy.

Physical stores still matter, but consumers want fewer stops

Physical retail remains at the center of the back-to-school season, with more than three-quarters of parents planning to shop in stores compared to 13.1% who shop exclusively online. To compete with the Big 3 (Walmart, Target, and Amazon), retailers need to give shoppers a reason to make them a destination rather than another stop. Parents are relying on fewer channels and consolidating purchases with fewer retailers than they did a year ago, reflecting a growing preference for efficiency over endless comparison shopping.

Mall traffic may have softened, but shoppers who visit continue to spend significantly more than average. The opportunity lies in creating an in-store experience that makes the trip worthwhile, from the right merchandise mix to clear navigation and seamless service.

Value defines the retail experience

Saving money remains parents' top priority this back-to-school season, but value now means more than finding the lowest price. Families are increasingly rewarding retailers that combine broad assortments, trusted inventory, and one-stop convenience. That's helping the Big 3 strengthen their position while dollar stores continue gaining traction among budget-conscious shoppers.

Value also looks different across households. Parents outfitting older students for high school or college continue to make larger purchases at specialty retailers, often spending nearly twice the average back-to-school budget on electronics, dorm furnishings, and other milestone purchases. Retailers that succeed over the long term won't compete on price alone. They'll differentiate themselves through convenience, trusted inventory, broad assortments, and shopping experiences that make decision-making easier for busy families.

What retailers and landlords need to know

One thing this year's survey makes clear is that parents aren't looking for more choices—they're looking for fewer obstacles. They want to know the products they need will be available, they want to finish their shopping efficiently, and they want to feel confident they're getting good value for their money. That's a different definition of value that's likely to shape far more than this year's back-to-school season.

Parents haven't stopped spending—they've become more selective about what makes a shopping trip worth their time. Price still matters, but so do convenience, product availability, and the ability to check off an entire school list without visiting multiple stores. For retailers and shopping center owners, that's a reminder that making shopping easier can be just as powerful as offering the lowest price.

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