

Supplying Utah schools

Last spring, when the Majestic Elementary administration told teachers they weren't allowed to send home supply lists, "I kind of had a panicky feeling," third grade teacher Julianne Mower said. "I thought, 'Our supply rooms are really empty. What are we going to use?'"

Due to financial strain caused by the pandemic, Weber School District officials instructed teachers to comply with a Utah law not previously enforced which states that teachers may not send home a list of required school supplies that students are expected to bring. Any supplies must be donated on a voluntary basis.

Mower said that for lots of families, money is "very, very tight." She explained, "[Parents] were feeling like if they didn't provide everything that other families did, that their students would be treated a little bit different."

Pioneer Elementary kindergarten teacher Jodi LaFeber added, "There's some guilt as a parent that comes over that when you can't provide the things that you've been asked to bring."

Weber School District spokesperson Lane Findlay said teachers are allowed to send out lists as long as their request indicates that the items are not required.

This rule has been in place for years, although it has not been enforced until recently. According to Utah law, school supply lists must include a disclaimer saying the supplies "may be brought from home on a voluntary basis." If students are unable to bring their own supplies, they will be provided by the school.

Previously, many district teachers sent out a list of school supplies each student was required to bring at the beginning of the year.

"When parents came to back-to-school night, they were coming with bags and bags of supplies," Mower said, remembering previous years teaching at Majestic.

The district committed to providing many of the needed supplies.

"We have asked our teachers not to request items that can be supplied through our warehouse," Findlay said. "The schools should provide as many of the supplies as possible."

This method of furnishing classrooms with necessary supplies isn't new. According to Bryan Mower, fourth grade teacher at Lakeview Elementary, Title I schools have always done it this way.

Title I schools, which predominantly serve students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, receive extra federal funding to "help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards," according to the U.S. Department of Education website. This money goes toward various programs, including purchasing supplies.

Before teaching at Majestic Elementary, Julianne Mower taught at North Park Elementary, another Title I school in the district.

“We never passed out supply lists,” she said. The supply rooms were “always really well-stocked” with virtually anything the students needed.

“When I went into the supply room at Majestic,” she continued, “I was really surprised at how empty the cupboards were, how there was just nothing there.”

Although the district provides basic supplies like pencils, scissors and glue, LaFeber said it’s hard on teachers because many supplies needed to run a classroom, such as tissues, pencil boxes and notebooks, are not available through the school. These need to be bought by either the students or the teachers.

The Utah State Office of Education published a study in 2015 outlining educators’ classroom-related purchases. The survey respondents reported just under \$3 million in total expenses, with 25% reimbursed through budget appropriation. On average, respondents reported spending \$425.85 per year on classroom expenditures.

LaFeber was worried when she first heard the news. She recalled thinking, “How much am I going to have to pay for? How expensive is this going to be for me?”

Kindergarten classrooms need lots of special supplies, and because of this, LaFeber said she always spends her own money. “We teach with manipulatives,” she said. “They still play to learn. We have to take up much of the slack if they are not provided.”

To help make up the difference, the district provided each teacher with \$300 to purchase additional supplies for their classrooms this year.

Additionally, Mower said her teaching team decided to purchase supplies using the money usually used for activities like field trips.

Because of this, Mower and her team had to get creative this school year when it came to providing fun experiences for the students. She is planning free or low-cost field trips to places within walking distance or virtual destinations.

Despite the present economic challenges, many parents were still willing to donate supplies. “Every year, I have parents asking, ‘Is there anything we can bring? Is there anything we can contribute to the class?’” Mower said. Because of this, she made a short list to give to parents at back-to-school night, but made sure she told them it was optional.

LaFeber told parents to pick up small incentives like candy at the grocery store if they are able.

“I’m still seeing the same individuals that have donated in the past donating at my school,” Bryan Mower, said. “So that hasn’t changed at my school at all.”

Heritage Elementary and Pioneer Elementary also received supply donations from the community as part of a 9/11 service project.

North Ogden resident Mindie Taylor organized a supply drive through JustServe, a website used to organize service projects.

“Teachers have been asked not to send out required school supply lists to parents, and the result is many teachers buying supplies for their students out of their own pockets,” the project webpage said. “We’d like to help ease this burden on teachers by donating some needed supplies.”

Taylor said she’s always willing to donate to local schools because they do so much for the students.

“I’m glad that they respected those that maybe are struggling financially, but those of us who aren’t, I still want to be able to help support them,” she said.

Taylor said serving local schools and supporting teachers is a great way to commemorate the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

For parents who weren’t able to donate supplies, LaFeber said they “don’t need to feel pressure” to send anything to school with their students and that it’s a relief for them to know that their child’s needs will be met. “I think some really did appreciate it,” she said.

Although she doubts the extra \$300 will be available every year, LaFeber likes getting supplies this way. She said she enjoys having control over her supplies and picking out what she wants to use in her classroom, even though it was more work because she had to do all the shopping herself.

Although as third-grade teacher, Mower said it’s nice to be able to send home a supply list, as a mom, this policy does take a huge financial load off of her family. With three children, she remembered paying “hundreds and hundreds of dollars” between fees and supplies every year.

“We never should have been sending out supply lists in the first place,” she said. “I think that education should be free and parents should not be burdened with a supply list.”