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OPINION

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BACK TO SCHOOL

How to help kids lacking supplies

BY JACKIE MARTINEZ SANCHO

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As parents gear up for the new school year, supplies are on the shopping list. Yet, many of our families — a shocking number — cannot afford them.



The poverty rate among children under 18 in Miami-Dade has risen from 23.6 percent in 2009 to 29.6 percent in 2012. In fact, more than 75 percent of Miami-Dade's public school elementary students qualify for free/reduced price lunches based on family income. An alarming number of our 345,000 students start the day hungry.

Fortunately, the school system alleviates that hunger by providing free breakfast for all students. Our district is hailed for its food program, a partner with The Education Fund's edible school garden nutrition initiative.

Unfortunately, our district is unable to provide a corresponding cushion for supplies.

A recent national study calculated the cost of classroom supplies at \$945 per teacher's classroom. Florida tax dollars are able to fund only \$200. Teachers absorb the \$745; many shell out \$1,000 or more — a huge sacrifice given our teachers' annual average base salary of \$48,500.

New school years inspire many efforts. Providing needy students with supply-filled backpacks is popular, especially with The Children's Trust, CBS4's Neighbors4Neighbors, and the complimentary Kids4Kids, among others.

For the classroom, I recommend a solution that supports teachers throughout the school year — The Ed Fund's Ocean Bank Center for Educational Materials. Going strong for 20-plus years, the Ocean Bank Center is one of the best ways for businesses to ease teachers' supply shortage. It has been hailed as a model for the nation.

After Hurricane Andrew's devastation in 1992, supplies flooded back into South Florida. Local leaders turned to The Education Fund for help in distribution efforts. Ocean Bank answered The Ed Fund's call to underwrite the center's successful implementation. Today, this 11,000-sq.-ft. warehouse of materials in Medley continues because the need is as urgent as ever.

A schoolteacher can visit the Ocean Bank Center twice annually to select supplies: from the traditional to the unusual, such as wire, tubes, or rods for science, art, or social studies projects. More than 1 million students have benefited from more than 20,000 teacher visits.

More than 800 companies — including mine — have donated leftover, overstocked, outdated, and new supplies. We think teachers will be thrilled to see the hundreds of business portfolios Humana donated for their students to use when going on internship interviews or simply to organize their notes.

Some companies donate manufacturing or construction remnants, such as plastics, pavers, or fabric.

Moving is a great time to unload supplies or furniture. Others take advantage of the up-to-200 percent tax deduction when export deals fall through. Some companies simply choose to donate useful items they sell, such as paper, paint, pens, and produce — just because they want to help our public schools.

Please ask yourself: What does my business have that inquiring children and creative teachers can use? Whether it's a savings in storage space or taxes, or for the love of teachers and students, there's no better time than now to step up to the plate.

Jackie Martinez Sancho is director of account management at Humana and a member of the board of directors of The Education Fund.

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