



Teachers Find All The Materials They Need at The Teachers' Exchange

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LAKELAND | Back-to-school rush was on last week at one Lakeland store in particular, but there were no Pokemon backpacks, lunch boxes or ankle socks at the Teachers' Exchange at 801 S. Florida Ave.

The store owned by Karen and Steve McKown is where one finds motivational stickers, brightly colored borders, alphabet letters and such books as "Charlotte's Web in the Classroom", "Take It to Your Seat Math Centers," "Target the FCAT" and this just in, the "Complete Common Core State Standards Kit."

Back to school at the Teachers' Exchange is where one will find teachers buying supplies and educational tools, placing orders for special items and preparing for another year. Teachers return to work in Polk County Monday, with students to follow next week.

"I'm here to restock," Tracy Miller, a teacher at Kathleen Elementary School, said last week.

"They have teachery things and there's no other place like it," she said.

Despite big discount stores, such as Walmart, online teacher materials and catalogues the Teachers' Exchange is thriving. The McKowns also have catalogs and an online site, but many teachers want to check materials out in person.

"We look for them online line to see what is there, but most teachers have to come in and see and touch," said Cyndi Cook who teaches at Pinewood Elementary in Eagle Lake. Helping her was her mother, Sherron King of Lakeland, who described herself as "volunteer gofer, gluer and fastener."

Although not a teacher herself, she is a strong defender of teachers.

"You just don't know how much all these teachers spend out of their own pockets to outfit their rooms," King said.

School officials said teachers received money from a fund given to and decided by each building principal. They also will receive money for their classrooms this year from the state funded Florida Teachers Classroom Supply Assistance Program. The actual amount has yet to be determined, they

said.

Teachers' Exchange has been in existence about 18 years, begun by Bonnie Bruorton and Sheila Graham, Steve McKown said. It continues to have a strong following and is growing.

"They started it out as a consignment shop, and it grew from there," he said.

The McKowns bought the store eight years ago. After careers as industrial chemists in California, the McKowns had moved to Lakeland to help expand a pharmacy chain, but instead decided they wanted to own their own business.

"We used our 401ks and IRAs to buy shares in a corporation we created to buy the store. So my 401k is a shareholder in the business," McKown said.

"It is a growing way to purchase a small business," he said.

Parents who want supplemental material for their children and the children themselves are also welcome, McKown said, but with two rules: no food or drink in the store and no touching the materials.

Children can always wait in the "School Is In" room, a room with kid-sized desks puzzles and other learning tools that the younger children think are just play.

Teacher Elizabeth Cox arrived with three children last week. The children immediately headed to the room as she did her shopping to decorate her third-grade room at Gibbons Street Elementary School in Bartow.

"They have such a huge selection of materials for the classroom, to help brighten them and to help with teaching," she said.

Regardless of its website, Teachers' Exchange is still a hands-on store.

"I have already made three trips here," said Lakisha Palmore, picking up borders for her second-grade classroom at Lewis Anna Woodbury Elementary School in Fort Meade, "And I will probably be back again this afternoon."

Over the rush from the shopping teachers, the McKowns could be heard on the telephone.

"I have your stuff, it came in today," Steve McKown said.

"Hey Steve, do we have any black chevron borders?" Karen McKown asked with her hand over the phone.

"I am expecting some in today," he said.

While the McKowns have protected their business against the online and catalog corporations, individual shopping is still important to teachers, Karen McKown said.

"They want to see how the items look and whether they will match their themes for their rooms," she said.

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