

The first day of school is often portrayed as a celebration of possibility: fresh notebooks, new pencils, and a backpack filled with hope.

For thousands of children across New Orleans, however, the first day begins with an invisible disadvantage.

Many students arrive excited to learn but without the basic supplies required to fully participate in classroom instruction. They immediately recognize that they lack what their peers have. Before the first lesson begins, many are already navigating feelings of embarrassment, exclusion, anxiety, and uncertainty.

This is not merely a supply issue.

It is a readiness issue.

It is a belonging issue.

It is an equity issue.

UTH Foundation believes that preparing a student for school extends far beyond distributing a backpack. True readiness means ensuring that every child enters the classroom equipped with the confidence, dignity, and resources necessary to participate from the very first moment of instruction.

Our Backpack + Beyond Campaign is a grassroots, community-driven movement designed to ensure that students begin school academically prepared, emotionally secure, and socially confident, while reducing the financial burden on classroom teachers.

Rather than simply donating backpacks, this campaign invests in student readiness, classroom equity, and long-term educational success. It addresses the need for preparation before the school year begins.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many families, preparing children for school means making impossible choices between rent, utilities, transportation, groceries, medicine, and school supplies.

The result is predictable.

Students often arrive missing:

- notebooks
- pencils
- folders
- binders
- calculators
- art supplies
- headphones
- hygiene products
- classroom-required materials

The absence of these seemingly simple items creates immediate educational inequities before instruction begins. This reality makes the role of belonging even more urgent.

THE CHALLENGE

Educational research consistently demonstrates that students learn best when they experience psychological safety and a sense of belonging.

The human brain is constantly scanning environments for signals of acceptance or rejection.

When a child realizes:

"I don't have what everyone else has."

their brain often shifts into a stress response.

Instead of allocating cognitive resources toward:

- attention
- memory
- executive functioning
- problem-solving
- creativity

those resources become devoted to self-protection.

Students begin wondering:

"Will someone notice?"

"Will my teacher ask me?"

"Can I borrow again?"

"Will they think I'm poor?"

These thoughts compete directly with learning.

Executive functioning—the brain's system responsible for planning, organization, attention regulation, working memory, and self-control—works best when children experience predictability, emotional security, and inclusion. Chronic stress associated with poverty undermines these functions and reduces school readiness. ([The Data Center](#))

A missing notebook is rarely just a missing notebook.

It can become:

- a missed assignment
- reduced classroom participation
- avoidance
- lower confidence
- disengagement

Belonging is not a soft outcome.

It is a neurological prerequisite for learning. With that foundation in mind, school readiness also depends on what happens before instruction starts.

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF BELONGING

School readiness extends beyond literacy and numeracy.

Students who begin the first week fully equipped are better positioned to participate immediately, remain organized, complete assignments, build confidence, engage with peers, establish positive classroom routines, and reduce instructional interruptions.

- remain organized
- complete assignments
- build confidence
- engage with peers
- establish positive classroom routines
- reduce instructional interruptions

The opening weeks of school establish behavioral patterns that frequently influence the remainder of the academic year.

Students who begin organized are more likely to stay organized.

Students who begin engaged are more likely to stay engaged.

Students who begin believing they belong are more likely to persist through challenges. That same readiness also affects the support teachers must provide.

READY TO LEARN BEFORE ENGAGEMENT

When students lack supplies, teachers quietly become the safety net.

Across America, nearly 95% of public school teachers report spending their own money on classroom supplies, averaging roughly \$470 annually, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. ([National Center for Education Statistics](#))

More recent national surveys suggest the burden has increased substantially, with teachers reporting average out-of-pocket classroom spending approaching \$895 during the 2024–2025 school year, while nearly all report that school supply budgets are insufficient. ([AdoptAClassroom.org](#))

Teachers routinely purchase:

- notebooks
- pencils
- folders
- tissues
- crayons
- glue
- hygiene supplies
- headphones
- classroom technology

They do so because they refuse to allow a child to feel excluded.

While inspiring, this should never become the expectation.

Teachers should be focused on teaching—not financing classrooms. That is why the campaign looks beyond the backpack and toward a broader community response.

THE HIDDEN COST TO TEACHERS

Most backpack campaigns end once supplies are distributed.
UTH Foundation proposes something fundamentally different.

Equipped to Belong

A permanent, annual community movement.

Instead of asking:

“Who needs a backpack?”

We ask:

“How do we prepare every student to thrive from Day One?”

The Backpack + Beyond Campaign centers around:

- Student Dignity
- Every child receives supplies without stigma.
- Classroom Equity
- Students begin equally prepared.
- Teacher Relief
- Teachers spend less personal income replacing missing supplies.
- Community Ownership

Businesses, nonprofits, artists, churches, civic organizations, alumni, neighborhoods, and families invest collectively in local students.

Annual Sustainability:

Rather than a one-time giveaway, Backpack + Beyond becomes an annual New Orleans tradition.

BACKPACK + BEYOND

Every pencil represents possibility.

Every notebook represents participation.

Every folder represents organization.

Every backpack represents confidence.

Every prepared student represents hope.

The question is not whether school supplies improve learning.

The question is: How much potential do we lose when students start behind before the first lesson? The answer points to why UTH Foundation approaches this work differently.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Founded by New Orleans artist and entrepreneur La Reezy, UTH Foundation exists to transform young people's trajectories by investing in opportunity before crisis.

Our philosophy is simple: Children flourish when communities prepare them to succeed.

The Backpack + Beyond Campaign reflects New Orleans itself.

- **Homegrown.**
- **Grassroots.**
- **Community-led.**
- **Built by neighbors for neighbors.**
- **It is not charity.**
- **It is shared responsibility.**

It recognizes that today's students become tomorrow's entrepreneurs, educators, healthcare professionals, artists, engineers, public servants, and business owners.

Preparing them begins with ensuring they have what every learner deserves. That shared responsibility is what the campaign asks the community to embrace.

THE UTH FOUNDATION DIFFERENCE

This campaign belongs to everyone who wants to help equip students to thrive.

- **Businesses.**
- **Corporate sponsors.**
- **Foundations.**
- **Neighborhood associations.**
- **Faith communities.**
- **Artists.**
- **Parents.**
- **Retirees.**
- **Community leaders.**

Together, we can ensure that no child begins school wondering whether they belong. Join us in making that possible.

Instead, they will begin knowing:

"My city believes in me."

UTH Foundation invites partners to help establish the Backpack + Beyond Annual Student Readiness Campaign as one of New Orleans' signature community traditions—an initiative that equips students, supports teachers, strengthens families, and invests in our city's future. This is the work that carries the campaign forward. Join us in building it. Because every child deserves more than a backpack. Every child deserves to begin the school year equipped to belong.

By: UTH Foundation

CALL TO ACTION