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Jul. 19, 2013

Back-to-school is back.

It's never too early for back-to-school shopping, at least in the retail world. The smoke had barely cleared from Fourth of July fireworks when major chains began rolling out their campaigns, and now the advertising push is in full swing.

But lest you think the back-to-school frenzy is a little premature, lots of parents are already hunting for clothes and supplies.

"I'm one of the early birds ... I actually just got all my shopping completed two days ago," said Tina Harbert of Lakeland, who cares for her 6-year-old granddaughter, Karly.

"I much prefer to get an early start with it, because I can't stand scrambling at the end and looking for things and not being able to find them," Harbert said Thursday.

School shopping has tremendous importance to retailers. Parents will spend an estimated \$72.5 billion this year as their kids return to school and college, second only to winter holidays shopping — measured at \$579.8 billion last year — according to survey data from the National Retail Federation.

Total back-to-school/college spending was estimated at a historically high \$83.8 billion last year.

"It's interesting how big this season has become," said Kathy Grannis, an NRF spokeswoman. "The months of July and August are second only to Christmas in sales for retailers. It's certainly not a discretionary or gift-giving holiday, it's needs-driven.

I think that's why we'll continue to see back-to-school remain so high on the list of

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“Generally a week or two out (from the fall semester) we start to get really busy for back-to-school ... a lot of guests are starting to get a good jump-start on their school shopping now.”

The NRF's survey of more than 5,600 consumers indicates many are starting early this year. About 24 percent of families with children in grades K-12 said they planned to be shopping at least two months before school — the highest figure in the survey's history — up from roughly 22 percent a year ago.

School spending levels in 2012 were inflated by pent-up demand and a growing population of school children, according to NRF. Families spent an average \$688.62 last year on clothes, supplies and electronics, but are projected to shell out an average \$634.78 this season.

“The good news is that consumers are spending, but they are doing so with cost and practicality in mind,” said Matthew Shay, the NRF's president and chief executive, in a report last week. “Having splurged on their growing children's needs last year, parents will ask their kids to reuse what they can for the upcoming school season.”

Consumers are still looking for ways to control their school shopping budgets, but spending levels are “well above” where they were a few years ago, Shay said.

Florida's sales tax holiday on some school products will be held on Aug. 2-4. During that period, no sales tax will be collected on clothing, footwear and accessories selling for \$75 or less per item, on school supplies selling for \$15 or less per item, and on computers and related accessories selling for \$750 or less per item.

Certain restrictions apply, and some items are excluded. More detailed information is available on the Florida Department of Revenue's website, dor.myflorida.com.

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