

MORE THAN A CHECKLIST

THE GROWING
COMPLEXITY BEHIND
THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL
SEASON



SCHOOL'S OUT FOR SUMMER BUT NOT OUT-OF-MIND FOR PARENTS

As another school year winds down, Canadian families shift into the rhythm of summer—less structure, lighter schedules, and a break from routine.

But even as that transition begins, the next school year quietly starts to take shape. For many parents, back-to-school is no longer a late-summer task; it begins earlier, as planning—mental, financial, and logistical—starts to build beneath the surface.

That shift became more visible in spring 2026, as WPP Media observed parents speaking more pointedly about the education system, particularly in provinces like Alberta and Ontario. Concerns around funding, capacity, and consistency were becoming more prominent.

This raised a simple question: *if the system is becoming harder to navigate, are parents changing how they approach back-to-school—and the role they play within it?*

To explore that, WPP Media conducted a national study between May 15 and May 30, 2026, surveying 150 parents across Canada to better understand the growing mental load surrounding back-to-school.



BACK-TO-SCHOOL NOW DEMANDS MORE FROM PARENTS

Back-to-school remains a consistent and familiar moment for Canadian families, but the effort required to manage it has increased in meaningful ways.

Three shifts stand out.

First, the season has become **more demanding to manage**, not because the core requirements have changed, but because the environment around them has become more complex. Cost pressures are higher, information is more fragmented, and preparation requires more coordination than it once did. What used to be a contained period of activity is now a more extended process that begins earlier and requires ongoing attention.

Second, spending behaviour is becoming **more deliberate rather than more constrained**. Parents are not stepping back from back-to-school spending; instead, they are prioritizing more carefully—protecting what matters most while reducing lower-confidence purchases. The emphasis has shifted from minimizing cost to minimizing risk.

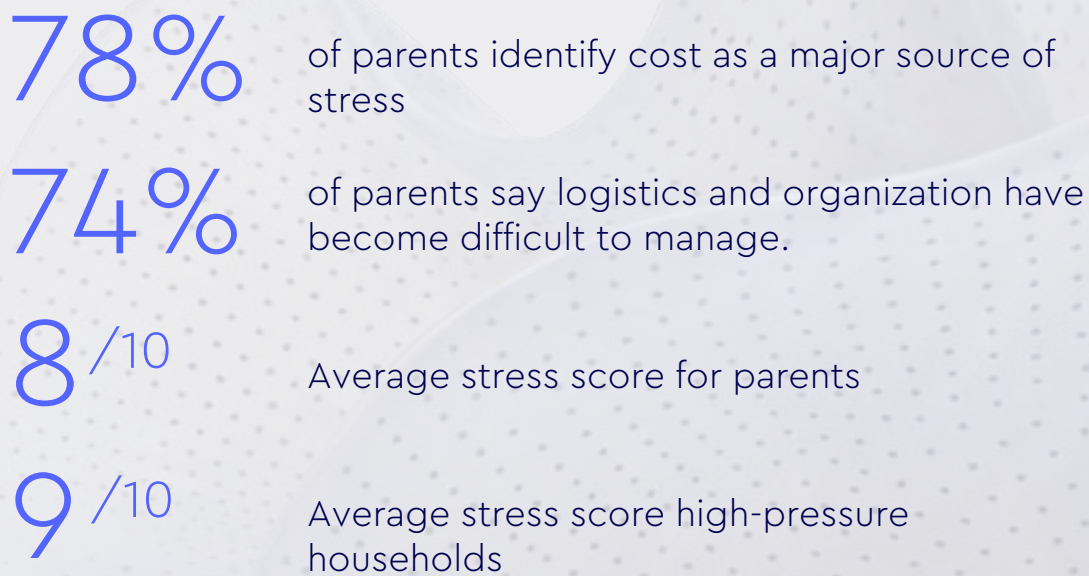
Third, parents are taking a **more active role in managing outcomes for their children**. Schools remain central, but parents are increasingly reinforcing, supplementing, and coordinating what sits around that experience.

Taken together, these shifts point to a broader reframing of back-to-school. It remains familiar in structure, but it now demands more planning, more judgment, and more coordination than it did in the past.



BACK-TO-SCHOOL IS GETTING HARDER TO MANAGE

On the surface, the season looks unchanged—school supplies, clothing, routines, the anticipation of a new year. But the experience beneath it has shifted.



These pressures are not new in isolation, but they are now compounding in ways that change how the moment feels. Roughly one in three households falls into what we define as a **high-pressure household**—families navigating financial strain, coordination complexity, and elevated stress simultaneously.

"Many of these programs can be quite expensive and when you factor in scheduling, transportation and time commitments, it becomes difficult to manage work and family responsibility." —Tariq, Milton

How that pressure shows up varies by province. In Ontario and British Columbia, it is primarily financial. In Alberta, it is more closely tied to system confidence. In Quebec, it is often moderated by stronger integration between schools and community programs—but still present.

That shift—from preparation to management—is subtle, but significant. It reflects a change not in what needs to be done, but in the amount of effort required to do it well.

PARENTS ARE MANAGING MORE THAN JUST A LIST

SPENDING HAS BECOME STRATEGIC

One of the clearest behavioural shifts is how parents approach spending.

Nearly 68% say they actively adjust purchases based on budget, but what stands out is not just where they are cutting back—it is where they are choosing to invest.

"You don't just buy everything on the list anymore. You think about what actually matters." — Karim, Quebec

Parents consistently describe protecting spend in areas that feel essential: durable products, tools that support learning or organization, and purchases that reduce uncertainty during the year.

Back-to-school spending, in this context, becomes less about minimizing cost and more about managing risk over time.

THE REAL BURDEN IS COORDINATION

If cost shapes decisions, complexity shapes the experience.

More than 61% of parents say coordination is one of the most difficult parts of back-to-school, with frustration often tied to fragmented information and misaligned timelines.

"It's not one big issue—it's all the little things that don't line up, and you're the one making them fit." — Danielle, Alberta

This burden looks slightly different across provinces, but the outcome is consistent.

Parents are not just preparing for school. They are coordinating it—bringing together multiple inputs into something that works in practice.

PARENTS FILL THE GAPS WHEN SCHOOL FALLS SHORT

There are real concerns about school board system capacity, with 58% of parents referencing resource constraints and 52% expressing mixed or negative sentiment toward support.

But the response to those concerns is not disengagement. It is adjustment.

"School is still the base. You just know you have to fill in the gaps yourself." — Marc, Quebec

Parents continue to rely on schools, but with a clearer sense of where they need to stay involved.

THE EXPERIENCE SHIFTS BY STAGE OF LIFE

While back-to-school is universal, the experience is not uniform. It evolves meaningfully depending on the age of children and the structure of the household.

For parents with younger children, the process is more instructional and uncertain. There is greater reliance on school guidance, but also more second-guessing about what is needed and how to prepare effectively.

"When they're younger, you second-guess everything—what they need, what's important, what you might be missing." — Amélie, Quebec

With older children, familiarity increases—but so does the weight of decisions. Parents become more focused on progress, performance, and future readiness, often supplementing where needed.

"It's less about figuring out the basics and more about making sure they're actually on track." — Rahul, Ontario

Household size adds another layer.

Parents with one child tend to prioritize customization, while those with multiple children describe a shift toward coordination—managing overlapping needs, schedules, and expectations.

"Since I have three boys 11-17, I am a single full time working mom, I have to plan carefully and prioritize the most important things first." — Eleojo, Vancouver

Across both dynamics, one pattern holds: the role of the parent becomes more active, but for different reasons.

PARENTS ARE BECOMING EDUCATIONAL MANAGERS

This is the most important shift to emerge from the research.

Parents are increasingly managing how return to school comes together for their children. This involves:

- Assessing needs
- Identifying gaps
- Sourcing tools or supports
- Coordinating everything into a coherent experience

More than 62% of parents report using supplemental support, though how that shows up varies by region and context.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

A shared behaviour, expressed differently across Canada

ONTARIO & BRITISH COLUMBIA	QUEBEC	ALBERTA
• Higher use of structured learning tools • Spend and planning shaped by cost pressure	• Greater reliance on school- and community-linked supports • Lower reliance on independent tools	• Higher concern with system support (52% negative/mixed sentiment) • More direct parent intervention

If this sounds like a lot, that's because it is. However, most parents wouldn't describe it this way— it's just something they do.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BRANDS

Back-to-school remains a universal moment for families with school-aged children, with a structure that is largely unchanged year over year. What has shifted is the experience of moving through it.

The process now requires more coordination, more decision-making, and more active involvement from parents, who are no longer navigating a simple purchase journey but managing a system of interconnected decisions—balancing cost, time, quality, and outcomes to ensure everything comes together effectively.

"You still do all the same things—but you pay more attention to how it all fits together."— Jason, Ontario

This increased complexity has changed not only how parents approach the season, but also what they value.

Simplicity has become a competitive advantage, as parents look for ways to reduce effort and make faster, more confident decisions.

At the same time, value is increasingly defined **by predictability**—products and services that feel reliable, durable, and low risk.

"The best things are the ones that just make it easier—you don't have to think as much."— Emily, British Columbia

For brands, the implication is clear. Back-to-school is no longer just a moment of purchase—it is a moment of **active management**. The brands that will matter most are those that fit naturally into that process, helping parents stay organized, reduce friction, and feel confident that everything is under control.

Because while back-to-school remains familiar, what it demands from parents—and how they manage it—has fundamentally changed.

THE VOICES BEHIND THE PAPER



ASTRID RAYNI

SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST, WPP MEDIA



LORENA CHIAROTTO

VP STRATEGY, WPP MEDIA

BEYOND THE PAGE

Knowing how Canadian parents are shifting from preparation to active management is only the first step. The real opportunity lies in how your brand responds.

If you want to learn more about the data behind this national study, or if you are ready to pressure-test your brand's back-to-school strategy, we are here to help.

Workshops & Custom Deep Dives

We host tailored workshops for brand teams looking to simplify the consumer journey and build high-confidence value for parents.

Get in touch with the team:

Astrid.Rayni@wppmedia.com

Lorena.Chiarotto@wppmedia.com