Back-to-School 2026

How Shoppers Navigate Required Purchases, Cost Pressure and Channel Choice

Surveyed back-to-school shoppers | July 2026

Executive Summary

Back-to-school is a stretched, cost-pressured shopping season rather than a single event. Surveyed shoppers report starting earlier while allocating the largest share of expected spending to August. They set budgets, use promotions, combine stores and online channels, and often fold back-to-school shopping into broader trips that include household errands, dining and other retail purchases.

The season begins early but peaks later. Eighty-four percent say they plan to start earlier than usual, and 54% had already started or completed shopping by the July 6–8 survey period. Yet August carries the largest average share of reported season spending, at 44%. Early activity appears to extend the season rather than simply move it forward.

Higher planned spending is not necessarily stronger underlying demand. Seventy-nine percent plan to spend more than in 2025. At the same time, 54% are concerned about affording everything they need, and 93% say higher prices have affected or are expected to affect their purchases. Spending can rise even while households' buying power stays limited.

Stores and online channels perform complementary roles. Ninety-one percent report spending or expecting to spend in physical stores, 85% report spending online and 76% report spending in store and online. Shoppers tend to use both channels together, handling browsing, comparison, purchase and pickup in different places.

The store trip extends beyond the school list. Among in-store shoppers, 93% expect at least one other activity during the same trip. Shopping for household needs, dining and shopping for non-school items are the most common additional activities. These are activities shoppers expect to combine with the trip, though the survey does not show that the back-to-school visit causes them.

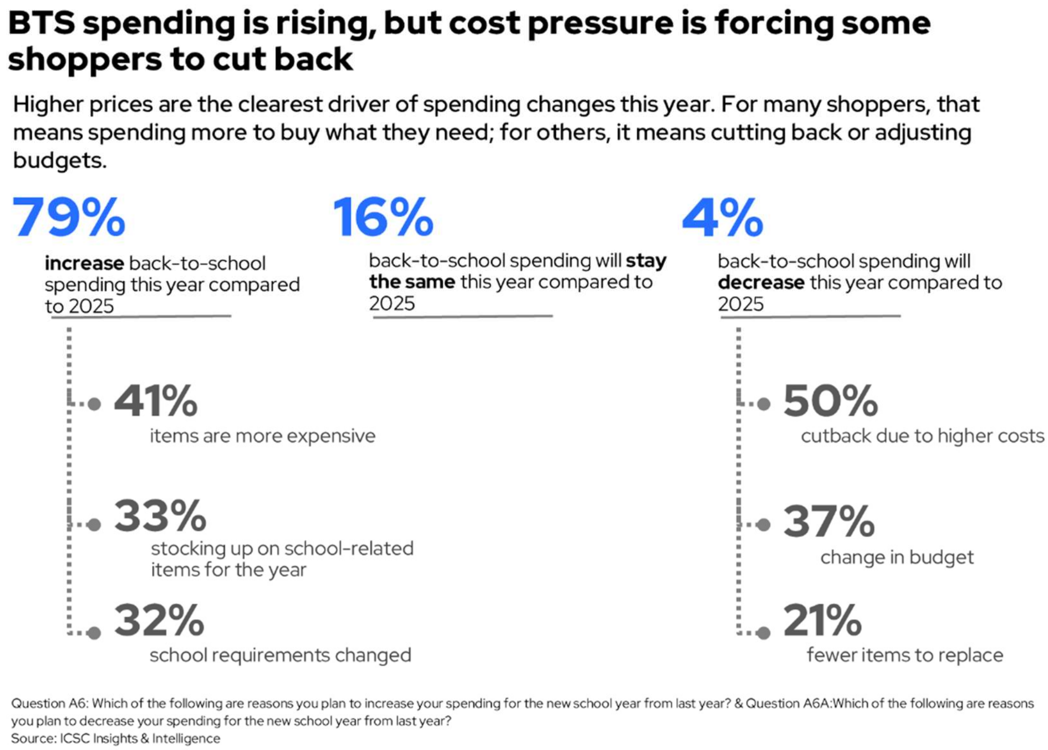

Figure 1: Most surveyed back-to-school shoppers expect to spend more than in 2025.

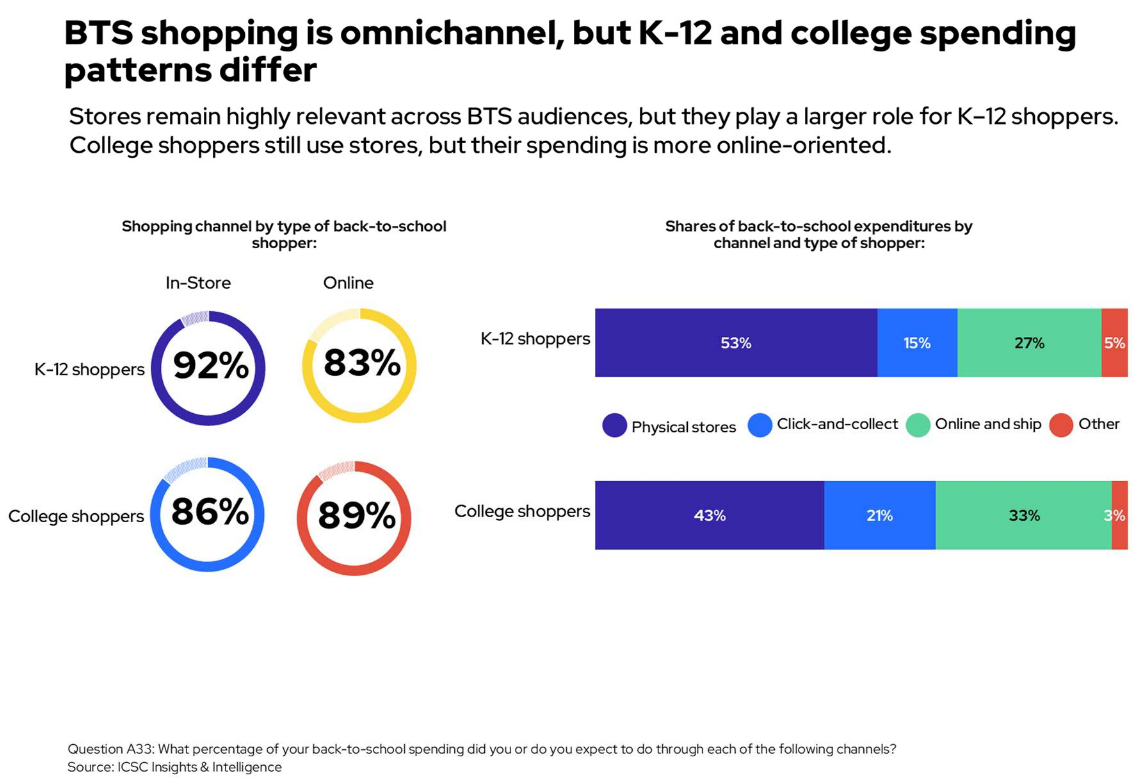

Figure 2: K–12 and college shoppers both use stores and online channels, with different reported allocations.

Why This Matters

Required purchases create demand, but the commercial outcome depends on how well retailers and destinations help households manage price, uncertainty, timing and travel. The evidence points to a few practical priorities, best treated as ideas to test rather than proven steps.

Back-to-school is a season not a single shopping trip, so early weeks can support browsing and list-building while inventory, labor and fulfillment hold up for the August peak. Clear prices, dependable availability and good-better-best choices make value easy to compare, and tracking units, mix and margin alongside revenue helps separate price-driven growth from stronger demand. Online search, store inventory, pickup and returns work best as one system, in which a broken handoff can undo convenience created elsewhere. Coordinating access, hours and tenant offerings around a household's wider errands helps shoppers finish more in fewer trips, while the store itself stays a source of certainty—fit, inspection, immediate possession and student participation—supported by clear displays, knowledgeable help and easy returns. Because K–12, college and teacher needs differ, communication and navigation work best when organized around the task rather than a single path.

Methodology

Online survey of 1,009 U.S. adults age 18 or older conducted July 6–8, 2026. Detailed findings are generally among 468 surveyed back-to-school shoppers. Results are self-reported and descriptive; percentages may not sum because of rounding.

Source: ICSC Back-to-School 2026 Survey.