

# An ever-increasing need

Record number of students qualify for Fill A Backpack two years running



Tracy Koo and her 8-year-old son Clayton Fischer, both of Wausau, get school supplies in August during last year's Fill A Backpack Fill A Need distribution at the Wausau National Guard Armory in Wausau. Organizers of the volunteer program say 5,533 students are eligible to receive donated supplies during the annual distribution, up from 4,392 students last year. (WAUSAU DAILY HERALD FILE PHOTO)

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For the second year in a row, a record number of low-income Marathon County students qualify to receive free school supplies through Fill A Backpack Fill A Need.

Organizers of the volunteer program, which collects and gives out free backpacks, pencils, notebooks and other school supplies, say 5,533 students could receive the supplies when they are distributed Aug. 20 at the National Guard Armory in Wausau.

That's the largest number ever recorded by the program, which has kept statistics since 2004, and it's a 26 percent increase from last year, when 4,392 students qualified. Students entering kindergarten through eighth grade who receive free school meals qualify for Fill A Backpack.

Many families are struggling in the sluggish economy, said Karla Zygowicz, president of the Workplace Volunteer Council,

*"There's a sense of security (for the students). It's like, 'I have this backpack with my things in it, so I'm set to go.'"*

**SHELLEY MILLER**

Thomas Jefferson Elementary School second-grade teacher

which runs Fill A Backpack Fill A Need. The record number of eligible students underscores the need for people to donate money and supplies to the program.

Zygowicz said she's confident that Fill A Backpack will be able to give students the supplies they need — typically 50 percent to 60 percent of students who qualify for the program collect supplies.

"But are we going to sweat about it a little bit? You bet," Zygowicz said. "You always sweat about it a little bit."

The number comes as no surprise to educators who have seen numbers of low-income students grow in the past decade. In the year 2000, 26 percent of students who attended the Wausau School District qualified for free and reduced-price

meal programs. In the 2010-11 school year, 49 percent did, said Nell Anderson, the district's director of education.

More than 75 percent of students at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School qualified for free and reduced-price meals, said Shelley Miller, a second-grade teacher there.

Plenty of Miller's students get their supplies through Fill A Backpack. "They say they went to the place where the big tank is," Miller said, referring to the armory.

Having new backpacks, crayons and notebooks helps students feel like they belong in school and helps them start the school year on a positive note.

"There's a sense of security," Miller said. "It's like, 'I have this backpack with my things in it, so I'm set to go.'"

## YOU CAN HELP

Volunteers are needed to help prepare for the distribution of school supplies starting Aug. 15. Signup will begin July 5.

Donations also are needed. School supplies can be dropped off in boxes set up at various sites across Marathon County beginning in late July. Items needed include backpacks, notebooks, markers, pencils and pens.

Cash donations also are accepted. A donation of \$45 typically will pay for a new backpack stocked with supplies.

For more information about volunteering or donating, call 715-848-2927 or log on to the Fill A Backpack website, [www.unitedwaymc.org/fabfan.htm](http://www.unitedwaymc.org/fabfan.htm).