

## Faculty members equip PreK-8 kids for back to school

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Corny and Ronald McDonald help out at the Back 2 School Party in August.

Illinois State Associate Professor Shifflet gives her time and service not only to college students, but also K-8 kids in the community through the Back 2 School Alliance

(<http://back2schoolalliance.org/>).

Founded in 2002, the initiative provides school supplies to students in collaboration with Bloomington District 87, Normal Unit 5 and Illinois Prairie Community Foundation. In 2002 their efforts yielded 50 backpacks full of supplies. This past August they netted 60 times that quantity.



College of Education faculty and staff Rena Shifflet (left), Erin Mikulec, and Jamie Watson participate in the Back to School Pizza Party, which also collected supplies for the Back 2 School Alliance's event.

School supplies these days can be expensive, and about 15 percent of residents in Bloomington and over 21 percent of those in Normal fall below the poverty line. The mission of the Back 2 School Alliance is to take care of this need for students, enabling them to be ready to learn on their first day of school. The alliance holds a Back 2 School Party in U.S. Cellular Coliseum before classes start each fall. Volunteers distribute supplies-filled backpacks to a packed house of students and families.

Shifflet has been working with the non-profit for four years now. For her, it is all about the kids.

"Once they have what they need, every kid should feel ready and excited to start school. It's great to see their smiling faces. Once you start volunteering, you don't want to stop."

The effort is driven by Shifflet and a committee of 22 community members who also enlist hundreds of volunteers to help them collect school supplies, raise money, and do the hands-on work of putting the Back 2 School Party together. Shifflet leads Illinois State's push on campus. In addition to setting up the donation boxes, she encourages ISU students, faculty, and staff to purchase supplies. Freshmen and sophomores who participate in the University's Preview event usually make a large contribution to the drive, she says.

Shifflet may have never gotten involved with the Back 2 School Alliance if it were not for her colleague, fellow School of Teaching and Learning faculty member Jan Meadows.

"She got me hooked. She is still our ringleader," Shifflet said.

Schools benefit in more ways than one. In addition to helping their students, the effort incentivizes families to register their students for school and take care of their immunizations sooner rather than later. Only students who have completed these steps may participate in the Back 2 School Party.

That's not all that takes place at the event. Community organizations hold a resource fair, and the Midwest Foodbank (<https://midwestfoodbank.org/home>) also provides every family with a free bag of groceries.

Want to get involved or donate? The Back 2 School Alliance collects supplies year-round. Visit their site (<http://back2schoolalliance.org/>) or contact Shifflet (<mailto:rashiff@IllinoisState.edu>) for more information.