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Feature Article

## Savvy School Shopping

For many parents engaging in back to school shopping is a big challenge- given the number of items to be bought and the demands placed by schools in purchasing them.

With the 2014 budget announcement, a great burden has been lifted off parents' shoulder as Government has made education free for all primary and secondary students, come next year. From 2014 parents do not have to worry about tuition or building fees unlike the previous years where the very thought of such fees griped parents. All, the parents will need to cater for now is uniforms, school bags, shoes, and stationery along with any other *extracurricular activity* costs which the school requires.

Parents should do a closet inventory to plan their back to school shopping. Everyone knows kids grow out of clothes quickly. However, before counting out last year's uniforms, bags and shoes, check the closet to see if those khaki pants and sandals still fit and are in good form. Maybe an older sibling's gently-worn clothes and shoes could be used by a younger child's back-to school wardrobe. The same also applies to school bags and books.

Parents should not hesitate in recycling and reusing things for school because by doing this they will be teaching their children the value of prudence and living within their means.

Like the festive season shopping, back to school shopping is equally hectic and full of dubious deals and this is why parents have to be vigilant and prudent.

Parents should avoid stores with advertisements that they are the “**preferred supplier**” for school uniforms for certain schools. Consumers are led to believe that they have to buy uniforms of particular schools from this trader only.

Such advertisements must be ignored and parents and guardians must purchase their children's school needs based on their affordability and quality.

In the past five years, the Consumer Council of Fiji has handled a total of 134 cases relating to school complaints where the issues range from parents being ordered to purchase items from one particular trader, consumers being overcharged on books, consumers were sold poor quality shoes, bags and shorts, consumers being given misleading information regarding extra tuition classes amongst other issues.

The Council anticipates that school shopping this time around will be easy on parents' pockets as they are already subjected to rising cost of living. Schools need to be act responsibly, unlike the issue highlighted in the case study below.

### **Case Study 1**

Mrs. Ram had set aside a set amount of money to do her daughters back to school shopping. In her list of items was her daughter's school uniform which she intended to buy from a cheap yet quality store. However, to her dismay she was told by her daughter that the school had informed the students that their uniform should only be purchased from a particular supplier which was selling the uniform at a high cost. If Mrs. Ram purchased the uniform from the school recommended shop it would surely bust her budget.

Mrs. Ram was left feeling deprived of her freedom to choose. She did not wish to pay \$70 for a dress which she could have easily gotten at a lesser price elsewhere. She then chose to lodge her complaint with the Council. Later the matter was put forward to the Fiji Commerce Commission for further action.

Exclusive dealing is not only a breach of the Commerce Commission Decree 2010 but also prohibits the consumer's right to choice. Consumers have the right to choose products and services at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality.

The Council would like to urge consumers to be responsible shoppers during for new school year. Consumers can simply save their money if they draw up a shopping list and stick to it, engage in comparative shopping, and focus on *needs* rather than *wants*.

Remember a responsible consumer is a Smart Consumer!