



**Back to School**  
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Excitement is in the air as kids return to school. Lunches are packed, and permission slips readied. New teachers, new classrooms, and new friends. For many, it's also a time for new school supplies and a new backpack. Cracking open that fresh box of crayons is a memory still filled with smell and color for me.

And so, it was an opportune time for *Presbyterians Today* to run its article on the church's involvement in sending children back to school. "[Back to School Means Back to Missions](#)," by Donna Frischknecht Jackson, dives into much beloved mission activities that support our local schools and students, including Blessing of the Backpacks. Wherever I go across our denomination, I see the church's generosity poured into backpacks stuffed with school supplies, according to class and grade (of course). They're often so full on that first day I've wondered how the elementary students can even wear them without toppling over. Recalling the days when the children were also involved in the church, our congregations are eager to help students off on an equal footing in this formative stage. Like you, I've helped organize many such events over the years.



I appreciated the article's reflection on how we do this well. The subtitle to the article reveals more: "What's your church's 'level of engagement'?" In the article, Dr. Irvin Scott, a faculty member of Harvard Graduate School of Education, identifies the "levels of engagement" of faith communities and public schools. He notes that school supply drives are transactional in nature: we buy supplies, hand them over, and we're done. It's hassle-free. Scott encourages us to move onto the next level, which is relational. "This is where faith communities make a commitment to spend time with children, getting to know them and understanding the kids. This is where conversations take place with the principals, hearing about the challenges children are facing. It is exactly these conversations that will provide a better understanding as to how a faith community can walk alongside the educational system," said Scott, noting that "becoming relational means mission efforts are more targeted."

From there, we can ask the even harder question of "why". Why don't children have access to backpacks, other than the church? Why is there inequity in the distribution of school supplies? Why are schools not providing them and relying instead on outside sources or often teachers, who are paying for supplies out-of-pocket. Diving into those questions leads us to areas where systemic change is needed, and our involvement can move to a third level: advocacy.

With Matthew 25 as our guide, we are challenged to eradicate systemic poverty. I hate to break it to you, but it will never happen if we stay at the transactional level. The need will persist from year to year. I'm glad we're starting there, but I pray that we'll move into the relational and advocacy levels, too. If you already are doing work at these levels, will you [share that with me](#)? I'd love to promote what's happening, so we can celebrate and learn from one another.