

School Is Back and School Savvy Is Here to Help

By Rebecca Wake

School bells are ringing again across Queensland and classrooms are filling with bright-eyed students, fresh uniforms and backpacks packed for the year ahead. Family routines are back in full swing as mornings return to lunchboxes, timetables and the familiar school-day rush. For many parents and carers, it is a mix of relief, pride and a quiet exhale, seeing children pressed, dressed and ready to learn.

For thousands of families, that readiness has been made possible with the support of School Savvy. Uniforms, shoes, stationery and school supplies can add up quickly, especially after the festive season. As households return to work and daily schedules pick up pace, the cost and organisation of the back-to-school period can feel overwhelming. That's where School Savvy steps in.

Now celebrating its 10th year, School Savvy continues to support families at one of the busiest times of the year. From its beginnings in Cairns in 2016, the initiative has grown into a statewide program supporting families across Queensland. What started as a small community appeal has, over the past decade, expanded through strong partnerships and local generosity to reach communities from Far North Queensland through Central Queensland and into Southeast Queensland.

Across Queensland, School Savvy 2026 saw pop-up shops open in communities to support families during the busy back-to-school period. These pop-ups provide low-cost, pre-loved school uniforms, stationery and essential items in welcoming and respectful spaces. Many locations also offer free student haircuts, helping children walk into the classroom feeling confident and ready for their first day back.

Over the past decade, School Savvy has supported more than 15,000 students to start the school year with the uniforms and supplies they need. By offering school essentials in one place, the program helps families avoid the high cost and time pressure of mainstream back-to-school shopping. Alongside uniforms, families can also access shoes, backpacks, lunchboxes and stationery.

“Rather than families having to visit multiple op shops to find what they need, they can come to one place,” said Centacare FNQ Executive Director Anita Veivers. “It makes the back-to-school process far more manageable at a time when families are already juggling a lot.”

In Central Queensland, School Savvy continues to play a significant role in supporting families during the busy start to the school year. Delivered by CatholicCare Central Queensland, the program has been operating across the region for the past eight years and remains fully community funded.

In January 2026, pop-up shops were held across seven locations including Mackay, Rockhampton, Yeppoon, Gracemere, Mount Morgan, Gladstone and Bundaberg, all opening within a single week. With no eligibility criteria or means testing, families were able to access low-cost uniforms and essential school items under an honesty-based model that encourages people to take what they need and leave enough for others.

Across the region, more than 4,200 visitors attended the pop-ups, with over 2,670 children supported and more than 160 free haircuts provided through the generosity of local volunteer hairdressers.

In Far North Queensland, where School Savvy first began, the program continues to be a familiar and trusted source of support for families. Operating across communities including Atherton and Cairns, the 2026 program saw a strong start at the Cairns Showgrounds, with around 171 families attending on opening day. Approximately 400 students were supported, and 28 free student haircuts were provided, helping children head back to school feeling confident and prepared. This year extended opening hours including Thursday evenings, and Saturday mornings have made it easier for families to fit school preparation around work and family commitments. As the program continues to grow alongside the communities it serves, In 2026, the program expanded its reach with the introduction of two new pop-up shop locations in Tully and Mareeba, bringing vital support to even more communities across the region.

In Southeast Queensland, School Savvy expanded its reach in 2026 with the introduction of a new pop-up shop in Maryborough, responding to identified local need on the Fraser Coast. Held at the Maryborough Neighbourhood Centre, the pop-up supported more than 200 local families preparing for the new school year.

“Seeing more than 200 families walk through the doors was a powerful reminder of both the need in our community and the generosity that exists here in Maryborough,” said Patricia Gorman, Area Manager for Centacare Family and Relationship Services Fraser Coast. “School Savvy is about dignity, choice and community connection. Thanks to the incredible support of local partners, families were able to access what they needed and children can head back to school feeling prepared, confident and supported.”

Families were welcomed into a safe, respectful and community-led space, with pre-loved uniforms and essential school supplies available for gold coin donation prices. The initiative was made possible through strong collaboration with local organisations and businesses, with community partners on hand throughout the day to show their support for local families and children heading back to school.

Across the Townsville region, School Savvy continues to support families during the January back-to-school period. The pop-up shops provide practical assistance in welcoming environments, helping families manage the cost of uniforms, shoes and school supplies at a time when household budgets are often stretched. For many families, the service offers both practical relief and reassurance as children return to the classroom ready to learn.

From Atherton through Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Brisbane and now Maryborough and Tully, School Savvy continues to meet families where they are, offering practical support that helps households feel organised, supported and ready as the school year begins