

# “Helping kids in need learn and thrive brings us endless joy!”



Student Support Network founder Laurie Taylor-Mitchell (right) with a volunteer

◀ Handwritten thank-you notes from the children deeply touch Laurie's heart

When Laurie Taylor-Mitchell learned how many students at her son's former high school were living in poverty, she founded the nonprofit Student Support Network that has provided basic supplies—and hope—to hundreds of families in need

**T**his is unbelievable, Maryland resident Laurie Taylor-Mitchell gasped when, in December 2015, she learned over 300 students at her son Andrew's former high school were living in severe poverty.

When she started researching poverty in Baltimore County schools, the education advocate and former college professor had never expected the problem would be so close to home. *How can kids learn if they are hungry or lacking basic necessities?*

Laurie's own family hadn't had much money when she was a girl, but some of these kids didn't have shoes that fit, winter coats or enough food to eat.

*I have to do something,* Laurie thought.

## Outpouring of love

Laurie drafted an email to her neighbors asking for volunteers to help collect donations for the Loch Raven High School students and their families. Within hours, her inbox exploded with people saying things like, *I had no idea! My grandchildren go there!* and *How can I help?*

Laurie put a pink boot on her front porch for donations. People had filled it so many times with money and gift cards over the next few days that she worried about leaving the donations out in the open, so

Kids take home bags of groceries



Every donation is greatly appreciated by school staff



The Baltimore Ravens are supporters



the school became the drop-off point. Meanwhile, a school social worker met with families to find out what they needed: laundry detergent, toilet paper, toothpaste, shampoo...the need for basic necessities was shocking and heartbreaking.

That winter, 125 volunteers helped 25 families by raising thousands of dollars. But Laurie knew there were still so many other families that needed help.

*I have to do more,* she decided and the Student Support Network (StudentSupportNetwork.org) was born.

**“It’s so gratifying. Once people know what the need is, they want to help.”**

### Room of heaven

Laurie filled out paperwork to apply for nonprofit status so the group would be able to apply for grants and issue tax receipts. In the meantime, a church gave her \$300 to get started and offered the fledgling organization free storage space in the basement.

After achieving nonprofit status, Student Support Network continued to grow. Today, the nonprofit has a “Room of Support”—or as one student calls it “Room of heaven”—in 21 schools in Baltimore County with free necessities for students. Staff can take students in to get food, clothing, school supplies, hygiene products and household supplies, including such things as light bulbs. Some kids couldn’t

do their homework because there was no light at night.

School nurses send home thermometers with sick kids and the organization stocks granola bars with student resource officers for students who might be acting out because of an empty stomach. With support from another nonprofit, I Support the Girls, Laurie’s group provides bras to female students and even their moms.

Staff can also make direct requests on behalf of individual students, like when a student’s feet hurt because their shoes are too small.

When schools closed at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, Student Support Network set up three huge distribution sites at schools and over the next 15 months, gave away a whopping \$7.2 million worth of food and supplies with the help of thousands of kindhearted people.

*Thank you for organizing the pantry. I love my shoes,* read a note from a student.

After receiving help at the holidays one year, a grateful parent told Laurie, *With the same light, we send it back times 100 to bless you and your family.*

*I just came back after my meeting with the student we talked about. For the first time since I have met him, he was smiling! He told me that no one has ever done anything like this to help him and his family before,* enthused a school staff member.

In the last fiscal year, the Student Support Network distributed over \$500,000 in food, clothing, school supplies and personal care items to students in need and their families. It fills Laurie, 67, with immense pride and gratitude.

“It’s just been really gratifying to see how far this has grown beyond me,” she says. “It’s not about me—not by a long shot. It’s about this community. Once people know what the need is, they want to help!”

—Jen Reeder

## 3 ways to help students in need

### 1 Donate supplies!

Go to [SchoolhouseSupplies.org](http://SchoolhouseSupplies.org) and click “Get involved” for info on how you can either host a school supplies drive or donate supplies from their most-requested list—like crayons and backpacks. All the goods are then distributed to needy kids to set them up for success in the classroom.

### 2 Be a mentor!

Join Big Sisters of America by visiting [BBBS.org](http://BBBS.org), clicking “Get Involved” and following the instructions to be matched with a child whose “likes” are similar to yours. Just a few hours together, twice a month, doing activities like helping with homework will bring joy, self-confidence and inspiration to a child in need.

### 3 Give tech resources!

Visit [Compudopt.com](http://Compudopt.com) and click “Donate” to support their mission of supplying technology, computers and Wi-Fi access to under-resourced kids. Help them grow their technical and digital literacy skills to equip them for their future careers!



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