

Making back-to-school torture pay

Two mothers have organized the dreaded fall shopping lists into a one-stop shop for lucky parents. Julie Beun-Chown reports.

BY JULIE BEUN-CHOWN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 14, 2009



Candace Derickx, right, and Laurie St-Julien organize back-to-school supplies in a small warehouse in Vars. The entrepreneurs operate a business buying and packaging supplies so that parents don't have to.

Photograph by: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

In a warehouse in Vars, Candace Derickx and Laurie St-Julien are working around the clock to get ready for the first day of school.

Never mind that September is still two weeks away, or that the days are still warm, or even that the sun is finally shining.

Derickx and St-Julien have 1,500 kids to buy for.

The brains behind a tiny company called Best Tools For Schools, Derickx, 39, and St-Julien, 35, are personally shopping for and packing school kits so parents don't have to.

An idea whose time has come?

Already, 23 Ontario schools have signed up to make the sanity-saving service an option for parents.

"The whole idea came out of the frustration of doing three or four trips to stores to get school supplies -- dealing with picked-over items, bringing the kids along and finding that specific colour of Duotang," says Derickx, a stay-at-home mother of three.

"Last year, the elusive colour was grey," St-Julien chimes in, laughing. "We can't eliminate fights over the Hannah Montana pencils, but we can at least get the grey Duotang."

Born out of a mutual loathing for back-to-school shopping lists sent home by teachers in June --

misplaced, found and doodled on before eventually being used -- the company was launched by the two friends in February at a teachers' conference in Ottawa. Their goal was to short-circuit the back-to-school scramble at the end of August.

Together, they sourced the school supplies, signed up quality suppliers like Crayola, got the goods shipped to the warehouse in Vars, put the kits together according to each school's needs, and now offer them for sale online to school communities and parents. Kit prices range from \$16 to \$95, depending on how many supplies the school expects parents to provide.

There's no administration fee for putting the kits together, and the partners say their supplies usually cost the same or less than the same items from traditional retailers. They can't match the stores' loss-leader items, but they compete in other ways.

"When you buy retail in the stores and you're following the list, the list will say three glue sticks but you have to buy them in a pack of six. So you end up buying more and spending more than you need to," says Derickx.

The partners make their return from a standard markup on items.

"I'm hesitant to give the exact margin," says Derickx, "because the barriers to entry into this business are low, and I suspect we'll have some serious competition before long."

As an incentive, Derickx and St-Julien offer the service as a fundraiser, so \$4 from every kit is donated to the school council. Customers can also chip in for "junior" and "senior" school kits that are donated to the school for families who have trouble making ends meet. The kits contain things like pencils, erasers, rulers and, for older kids, geometry sets.

"Laurie and I are involved in our kids' school, so we see the bridging shortfalls in funding," says Derickx, who lives in Navan. "School supplies are needed every year, plus there are levies and fundraising on top of that. It's not getting easier for anyone."

To use the service, shoppers need a code that they can get from participating schools or find on the company's slick, interactive website, toolsforschools.ca.

Since launching their business, "we've had school councils, principals, teachers and parents approach us," says Derickx. "We had a mother from Rockland call up and literally say, 'Where have you been all my life?'"

Although August is their busiest month -- "Our parents take our kids. A lot," Derickx laughs -- the pair spend the rest of the year dealing with suppliers, knocking on school doors and making calls. And with the recent addition of a London, Ont., school, they are formulating plans to expand throughout the province.

That's a long way from a year ago, when the two friends, who'd met through their children's school, daydreamed of one day owning a small company that would work with their hectic schedules.

After "talking to other mothers about the frustration of back-to-school shopping," Derickx pitched the school supplies idea to St-Julien, who jumped at it. With little business experience -- St-Julien studied early childhood education and was a professional organizer while Derickx has a banking background -- they launched into the project, funded 100 per cent by their own lines of credit and RSPs and urged on

by their "totally supportive husbands," St-Julien says.

"We started this because we hated back-to-school shopping," St-Julien says with a laugh. "Now it's all we do."

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Best Tools for Schools

Product: Custom-assembled school supply kits

Aimed at: Parents of participating schools

Price: \$16 to \$95, average \$50

Typical contents: Pencils, pens, facial tissue, resealable plastic bags, colouring pencils, Duotang folders, scissors, markers, erasers, glue sticks

Information: toolsforschools.ca

Deadline to order for upcoming school year: Sunday

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