



Making Getting Ready for School Easy

Kitting up for
success in class

by IRIS WINSTON

School started early for Laurie St-Julien and Candace Derickx last year.

Preparing for the upcoming school year is always a busy time for the two mothers, who each have two young children. But last fall, it was not just a question of Laurie buying school supplies for her two sons, Jack, 7, and Ben, 5, and Candace buying for her two daughters, Morgan, 7, and Ava, 5. They also had to shop for 1,500 other children.

This was the number of customers that they served in the first year of operation for Best Tools for Schools, a company that prepares customized back-to-school kits for students and delivers them directly to their schools.

"This is a brand-new idea in Canada," says Laurie, adding that the company was born of the two business owners' frustration with searching — sometimes fruitlessly — for the long list of items that each child must take to school.

The two, who both chose to stay at home while their children were small, met through the kids. "I met Laurie at my daughter's birthday party," says Candace, who used to be in the banking business. "I had her whole class over. Laurie and I hit it off right away and have been fast friends ever since."

The two talked of going into business together when the children were in school. From there, it was a matter of finding the right idea.



Laura St-Julien (left) and Candace Derickx.

"Candace and I started this because we hated back-to-school shopping and were both looking to get back into the workforce full-time," says Laurie, whose previous business as a professional organizer also grew out of offering a service that she would have liked herself. "So we put a new idea out there knowing that we would love this service ourselves."

The response was immediate. Parents appeared to be delighted with being spared from hunting down folders in specific colours, pencils or geometry kits of a particular kind and all the other "must-haves" on their lists. Instead, they ordered online and paid the same or less than regular retail prices for personalized kits that matched the teachers' requests precisely.

"Every kid is different and every kit is customized," says Candace. Therefore, kits vary in price, ranging from a low of \$15 to a high of \$95, depending on the specifics requested.

"The average cost is about \$50," says Laurie. "We're very competitive with stores because we go directly to the manufacturers."

Two other factors have added to the program's popularity. The first is the gift of time. "We've had lots of mums with three or four kids who say they love the program for the time they save," says Candace.

The second extra is that Best Tools for Schools is set up to raise money for participating schools.

"A large part of our business is giving back to the community," says Laurie. The company donates \$4 from every kit sold to the child's school. In addition, customers have the option of donating a kit to a child in need at the school.

"We delivered 30 donated kits last year," says Laurie, adding that Best Tools for Schools is now working with the United Way, the RCMP and the Department of National Defence to deliver many more donated kits for the next school year.

In the first year of operation, most of the kits sold went to schools in Ottawa. "But because the lists and ordering are online, we are not limited to Ottawa schools," says Laurie. "Last year, we had one school in London, Ontario, for instance. This year, we are going large into the GTA and have also added a new component for preschoolers — arts and crafts materials for home use."

As Best Tools for Schools moves into the Greater Toronto Area, the owners are collaborating with other contractors and are considering franchising. "That's one of many options," says Laurie. "We're contacting a lot of people before we move forward. We want to be sure to do this the right way." ■

For more information about Best Tools for Schools, visit www.toolsforschools.ca.

