



**From Christina Pumphrey, PTSA President and Lead Organizer of Pine Grove Middle Network:**

After hearing about Laurie's successes with Loch Raven Network, I had great interest in starting a program at Pine Grove Middle. As PTSA President at PGMS, I had several parents reach out to me at the beginning of the year regarding behavior issues that had been observed at the school. The PTSA held a behavior and discipline roundtable to discuss concerns with PGMS staff and BCPS staff. After this roundtable, another parent (our lead volunteer, Davida) approached me: although parents were addressing discipline problems, she was concerned about students coming to school hungry, which she thought was a major reason for behavior problems. When I heard that Laurie would be speaking about Loch Raven Network (now the Student Support Network) at a meeting for PTA Council of Baltimore County, I invited Davida to attend the meeting, with the goal of starting a program at PGMS. We were both shocked to hear the statistics regarding the number of homeless students and families living in poverty that attended PGMS (361 students qualifying for Free and Reduced Price Meals, 38% of all students at the school, and 18 identified as homeless).

Laurie and I met on a couple of occasions to help me start a program to open a closet/pantry at PGMS. The first step was to reach out to the principal and staff. I quickly realized that the SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) program at PGMS had a storage area for clothing and food donations and had called it the Helping Hands Closet. However, it was not organized and a lot of clothing in there was unsuitable for counselors to give out when students needed a change of clothing. We were able to take over the space and we changed the name to "The Grove". Davida and I took several afternoons to organize the closet. We ended up donating many large bags of unusable clothing to charity and still had plenty of clothing to stock the The Grove. We also had canned and non-perishable foods from the prior year's Thanksgiving Drive. We re-organized the closet into a place where students could go to "shop" for items.

At our next PTSA meeting, I spoke about this new initiative and we decided to accept donations of food, toiletries, school supplies, etc. at our next PTSA meeting to get the ball rolling. The many donations received at that meeting made for a great start to the program.

After a couple months of progress with The Grove, I met with Laurie to discuss the possibility of The Grove becoming part of the Student Support Network and we transformed into the Pine Grove Middle School Network.

Although we had a very slow start to students visiting The Grove, visits gradually picked up and we had our most successful month in May with 14 student visits. We provided the guidance and nurse's office with baskets of food and grab and go toiletry items and these have been hugely successful. We received \$300 worth of grocery store gift cards, which were provided to needy families for use over the summer. We had a student in desperate need of sneakers (he had been wearing a pair of shoes that were 2 sizes too small) and bought him a brand-new pair of shoes. He was extremely thankful and that touched my heart!

At this point, Pine Grove Middle Network has a budget that can be used for urgent student needs requested by school staff. Students who visit The Grove can list needed items on a "wish list" so that we can provide any needed items that are not available when they visit. We also have a Sign-Up Genius site online, which lists items that can be donated. In addition, we have a Facebook Page where I can list any information about fundraisers or donations collections. During the school year, I would often post information regarding specific items that were needed in The Grove, and the response was fantastic! We almost immediately received any requested items.

This had truly been the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my life! I know that we are helping so many students in need. There is nothing better than that feeling of being able to help children.

