

Why I Give:

Kate & Mark McAllister

When Kate and Mark McAllister bought their home in a beautiful Philadelphia suburb, they never planned on their child attending a private school since they were moving to one of the most highly-ranked public school districts in the nation. However, when their daughter Bryn entered kindergarten, they quickly realized that public school might not be the best fit for her, as she began to struggle in the classroom and lose confidence in her abilities.

Throughout Bryn's kindergarten and first grade years, the McAllisters followed the school's suggestions and tried support programs to supplement Bryn's classroom experience. "All of their programs seemed to be geared toward kids who weren't being read to or didn't have exposure to reading," says Kate. "They didn't seem to be geared toward a child who actually had a different way of learning or different needs than the typical student. By the end of first grade, Bryn's self-esteem was at rock bottom."

The McAllisters decided to have Bryn privately tested. Kate recalls that the tests revealed that Bryn's reading rate and fluency showed a "clear disconnect." On the advice of the psychologist who administered the test, the McAllisters attended a Benchmark Open House. Kate was soon convinced that Bryn needed a program like Benchmark. Mid-way through second grade, they enrolled a reluctant Bryn. Fortunately, the changes came swiftly.

"We saw the impact Benchmark had on Bryn immediately," says Kate. "In terms of not just her reading but her self-confidence and her ability to self-advocate. We knew that Bryn was in the right place and wanted to do anything we could to support Benchmark."

Mark and Kate are now faithful donors to The Benchmark Fund. They

choose to give out of an appreciation for how Benchmark's curriculum and teaching methods work for students who learn differently. They see that Bryn has learned to think creatively, to look at subjects with a broad perspective, and to explore the strategies she has learned to facilitate her own growth. Mark and Kate believe that all of these skills will benefit Bryn and her classmates for the rest of their lives. For those reasons, when the McAllisters were given the opportunity to be one of the benefactors of the school's new Aquaponics program (see sidebar), they jumped at the chance.

"We think it's the hands-on learning opportunities and the conceptual learning that the kids remember and gives them a greater understanding of the world," says Kate. "We love that Benchmark teaches that way and they teach it in so many cool ways. To us, supporting the Aquaponics program seemed like a no-brainer."

"Before Bryn came to Benchmark, she would get frustrated and a wall would go up. She would be done," Kate continues. "Now, she knows if she starts to get frustrated, she just has to step back and try a different strategy. She has this whole toolbox that she can tap anytime she needs to. She's learned perseverance, she's confident, she wants to learn, she likes to be a leader, and she's always participating."

"Coming to Benchmark has been the most important and influential decision we have made as parents, without a doubt," Kate says. "It's the most important thing we did for Bryn. We are forever grateful to Benchmark."

Interested in giving to Benchmark School? Benchmark's fiscal year ends June 30, 2018. For giving opportunities, visit BenchmarkSchool.org/giving. 



The McAllister Family

What is Aquaponics?

Aquaponics is the combination of aquaculture and hydroponics, or the science of growing fish and plants together in one integrated, soilless system. It is widely determined to be the most sustainable, naturally grown agriculture for the future.

Building STEM Skills through Aquaponics is a program developed by Riverbend Environmental Education Center in Gladwyne to provide teachers with all of the tools and skills needed to deliver an innovative, STEM-based curriculum. Building STEM Skills through Aquaponics recently received the 2017 Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence.

Through the generosity of our benefactors and in partnership with Riverbend, Benchmark School will now offer this exceptional, hands-on curriculum to sixth and seventh graders, bringing science to life as they think critically and work collaboratively to address the challenge of growing healthy food for future generations. The initial Aquaponics project at Benchmark will include a 20-gallon aquaponics system for the classroom, teacher training, professional support, and a full-day field trip to Riverbend's aquaponics greenhouse for students.

Benchmark is grateful to the McAllister and Veale families, our Aquaponics benefactors, who have allowed us to bring this award-winning program into our curriculum. We are thrilled to introduce Aquaponics during the 2017-2018 school year.