

Virtual Volunteer Tutors During Remote Learning

Denver Public Schools

Denver, CO



The Denver Public Schools (DPS) Foundation and Volunteer Services continue their work to address emerging needs for students because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to remote learning. Together with DPS leadership, they identified the need to support students academically with virtual volunteers. The virtual learning environment is a challenge to students, educators, and families. DPS worried that the move to virtual learning would disproportionately impact students of color and students experiencing poverty. Therefore, the DPS Foundation and Volunteer Services wanted this year to be a time of increased connection with an intensified focus on equity.

By engaging corporate and community volunteers, DPS sought to support students' growth and learning both while they are in a remote school environment and when they return to the classroom. The program's goal was to provide an opportunity for students to be more engaged with their learning through access to a caring adult that can support their learning goals. The DPS Family and Community Engagement (FACE) - Volunteer Services, Family Empowerment Team, Literacy Buddy Volunteers, DPS Foundation, and School Partners Program Manager all collaborated to get the program up and running.

During the first phase of the program, literacy and/or math tutors were recruited to tutor virtually. Volunteer onboarding included a background check, online volunteer orientation webinar, and a Zoom interview prior to being assigned to a school. Each volunteer met with the teacher to gain information specific to the lessons and assigned students. Additional resources also included tutorials navigating Google Meet, SeeSaw and other district remote resources. The program was evaluated by volunteer tutors self-reporting satisfaction/impact observed when engaging with student(s). The district noted challenges with non-employees (volunteers) restricted access to district sponsored online curriculum. It became challenging for teachers to provide Google Meet links prior to each session at the start of the program. However, once tutors and educators established a routine and a relationship the process was solidified. Students would also sometimes turn off their cameras to avoid answering questions. This was also resolved after the first few weeks of remote learning once the students established a positive relationship with the tutor.

The virtual volunteer program will be conducted again in fall 2021. The district is currently working with the IT team to develop a workaround so volunteers can access district Google Meets and other online resources including SORA so students do not control the shared screen. One volunteer reported, "In some cases, volunteers tutoring English conversation to refugee students where most of the students are women with small children at home, are Muslim and many do not show their faces on the screen. This made teaching a little more challenging, but adult students were very grateful for the opportunity to learn. Just as rewarding, the tutors find it very educational to learn about the students' cultures and religions."