

In A-OK's Zoom mentoring program, the rewards outweigh the challenges

An article by Larry Carson, A-OK Mentoring & Tutoring volunteer

Mentoring an antsy boy via Zoom can be a challenge, but Karol Olsen, a volunteer with [A-OK Mentoring & Tutoring](#), in Howard County, said the rewards outweighed the challenges.

Although often distracted by what popped up on his computer, her fourth grade charge showed he was interested in seeing her too.

Olsen, a six-year volunteer, said, adding that “it’s really cool to see the growth” in him since first grade, when she began the relationship.



Bob Miller, a retired veteran teacher and A-OK volunteer, agreed about the Zoom experience. “You couldn’t really sit beside him and do things, but it was still pretty good,” he said, about the 5th grader he stuck with. “I still enjoy working with students,” he said, especially without the burden of school bureaucracy he faced as a teacher. Some volunteers even continued “seeing” their young charges over part of the 2021 summer.

Now, with kids back in classrooms and the virus in sharp decline, A-OK director Amanda Mummert is hoping to get back the dozens volunteers who stopped seeing children amid the chaos and prepare, dare she say it, for a “normal” year in September, 2022.

“We went from serving 400 students per year to serving 25 students in 2020,” Mummert said. “Two years later, things are finally opening up,” she added.

Like every other endeavor, the pandemic walloped the nearly two-decade old volunteer program in several different ways, said Mummert, who started running A-OK just as schools were closing in early 2020.

From the roughly 125 volunteers before the virus struck, she watched the number shrink to about 50 now working with children.

First, there was the mad scramble to discover the possibilities of Zoom, and then figure out how to keep in touch with kids already spending long days in front of a laptop computer without degrading security and supervision. School teachers and counselors were stretched very thin and exhausted, sometimes unable to respond or coordinate as they struggled to keep some kind of schooling going during the

2020-2021 school year when many adults also fell sick, all the buildings were closed, and then resumed in-person learning this year.

If that weren't enough, many of the volunteers are like me, Larry Carson, older and not always comfortable using computers or figuring out ways of interacting with a child without being in the same place.

I felt ineffective if I couldn't be together with my student in person to play games like Uno, The Game of Life or Connect 4, or read. Now I too am hoping to start seeing my now 7th grader this spring.

Olsen said her boy liked to chat, though mostly just about things he was doing, not really deep stuff. On Zoom, her student was easily distracted by whatever thought popped into his head, but he stayed in the chair. "It's got a completely different flavor to it," she said about connecting with a computer. Still, Olsen adds: "[My mentee] He seems to like the time with me," and he reliably logs in, week over week, each part of the pair in the safety of their own homes.

Whether Zooming or in-person at the school buildings, Howard County elementary and middle school students need trustworthy adults in their lives right now. Over the next few years, we will continue to see the academic, social, and emotional fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to online schooling for nearly two years.

No matter a mentor's comfort level or risk of illness and complication, A-OK Mentoring & Tutoring can connect volunteers with students to help them make a difference in the life of a child. A-OK has options that will work for anyone interested in helping. All it takes is one hour a week, and a positive, resilient attitude.

"Please consider becoming a volunteer mentor-tutor with A-OK," Mummert said. "We really need caring adults who are ready to invest in the next generation with time, laughter, and kindness." Anyone interested can contact A-OK at aokmentor@gmail.com, call or text 443-895-2457, or visit the group's website at www.aokmentor.org, and www.Facebook.com/aokmentors

