

K–12 Virtual Tutoring: An Equitable Pandemic-era Service Worth Continuing

by **Jeanie Diaz**
Youth Librarian,
Belmont branch of
Multnomah County Library
jeand@multco.us



JEANIE DIAZ (she/her) serves as Youth Librarian at the Belmont branch of Multnomah County Library. Born and raised in Portland, she earned her graduate degree from San Jose State University in 2008 and has been working in and around Portland area public libraries ever since. She especially enjoys providing storytime, working with her amazing colleagues, and encouraging kids to be creative. When she's not at the library, she can be found petting her cat, loving on her family, poking fun at life, making art, taking naps, and reading.

It's 3:45 on a Tuesday afternoon, and I'm waiting to join the Zoom meeting for K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual, a weekly service provided by Multnomah County Library (MCL). Coordinated by my colleagues, Youth Librarian Jen May and Bilingual Spanish Program Specialist Minerva Llerenas, the service is offered year-round in six- to eight-week sessions and staffed entirely by volunteer tutors. My role is to provide day-of support for the tutors and coordinators.

Shortly after I arrive, our tutors start showing up. Jen checks in with a few of them. They ask Melissa, one of our volunteer tutors, “Did you get the homework I sent you from Kaleb’s mom?” Melissa confirms, then asks about a different student as more tutors arrive. Meanwhile, Minerva notices a Spanish-speaking family has entered the waiting room, so she sends them a quick message: “Hola! Bienvenidos, comenzamos en unos minutos.”

At around 3:55, we start to hear a chorus of dings as more students appear in the waiting room for their 4 pm appointments. For Jen, that means it's time to move our volunteer tutors into their breakout rooms, where they'll hang out and wait for their first students. Today we have 17 breakout rooms, one for each tutor. Once the tutors are in their rooms, it's just Jen, Minerva, and me in the meeting, and it's 4 pm. Time to admit the students! “Ready?! Here they come ...”

As soon as Jen hits the magic “Admit All” button, we're overcome by a sea of screens popping up all around us, some with the camera on, some off, most entering with some kind of greeting. “Hola!” “Hello!” “Welcome back,” we say, and then start on the process of checking the students in. Jen greets each student by name and confirms the name of their tutor so that I send each student to the correct breakout room.

Once we've assisted the students who are here, we then ask, “Who's not here?” I take over hosting duties temporarily as Jen and Minerva get to work on contacting the

students who are not here yet, calling and texting reminders to families via county-owned smartphones. Eventually, Jen and Minerva reach the students, and they arrive at the Zoom meetings for their appointments. Phew. Another session of K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual has begun.

Background

In the midst of a bustling session, it's hard to believe that before COVID, none of this existed. Beyond offering Tutor.com and occasional 1-1 Homework Help with teen volunteers at select library locations, Multnomah County Library had never offered a formal tutoring program for youth. But then COVID happened, and shortly thereafter, MCL revised its priorities (2020) to meet the times. One significant update to the priority of supporting education and learning was the statement, "We offer students tools and resources to help virtual and in-person learning."

To focus on meeting this priority with an equity lens, management assembled a team of staff, eventually known as the Home Learning Support Team, in October 2020. When Jen, Minerva, and I joined three other colleagues on this team, our first task was to undergo a visioning process to figure out how to support students in the communities hit hardest by the pandemic. Among the programs and services we discussed was virtual tutoring. After our management sponsor approved it as one of our high-priority projects, Jen and Minerva got to work.

First, they reached out to library systems that were already offering virtual tutoring so that we could find a model that worked for MCL. While many offered services like Tutor.com or Brainfuse, there were few that coordinated dedicated one-on-one tutoring services. They consulted the Boston, San Jose, Miami-Dade, Philadelphia, and Charlotte Mecklenburg libraries. "Every system was doing it in a different way," recalls Jen. "None of them were perfect. Some paid teens. Some only used teachers. Some had staff doing the tutoring. We chose to use volunteers because we already had a robust volunteer services department with lots of volunteers willing to help." By the time Jen and Minerva were ready to launch the pilot in May of 2021, they had trained and oriented six volunteer tutors, all of whom had served as adult literacy tutors prior to the pandemic.

Centering Equity

In addition to talking with other library systems, Jen and Minerva also took steps to ensure that K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual centered equity from the start. According to MCL's revised priorities (2020), "Multnomah County Library will focus library resources on our community's recovery, starting with those most deeply impacted by the crisis." To support families whose first language is not English, Jen and Minerva planned to offer the service in both English and Spanish, with the intention of someday expanding to other target languages. Furthermore, they focused engagement and promotional efforts on youth attending priority schools, as identified by the Multnomah County Schools rubric, which ranks schools according to such data as percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch and percent students of color.

By centering these schools and these neighborhoods, they intentionally focused our services on students of color, students who speak a language other than English at home,

and students living in poverty. Another part of the equity piece was to deliberately avoid promoting the service to the wider, more privileged public. “We didn’t, and still don’t, market this to the whole world,” says Jen. According to most responses on the intake form (Multnomah County, n.d.), most people hear about it through friends, teachers, and other community connections.

Another important aspect of centering equity is ensuring that we are recruiting tutors who are not only prepared to help in a variety of subjects but are also flexible and aware of the myriad issues facing the families we’re trying to reach. In volunteer training, Jen and Minerva emphasize patience and meeting the students where they are that day. Tutors have helped students with autism, dyslexia, socioemotional difficulties, and family trauma. One time, a tutor shared with us that her student was upset, couldn’t focus on her homework, and just needed someone to talk to. So instead of a tutoring session, it became a listening session.

Given the virtual nature of this service, it’s convenient for families to attend because they don’t have to worry about getting somewhere at a designated time. However, it also poses an equity challenge, as many of them do not have access to the technology necessary to participate. When families register for K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual via the online form, they are asked if they have reliable access to technology. If they answer that they do not, we try our best to coordinate that access. During the 2020-21 school year, most students were given laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots from their schools to participate in online classes. However, during the following school year, many families participating in the tutoring service lacked the technology to continue. At times, they would have connection problems as they attempted to join the Zoom meeting.

To help address this, Jen and Minerva have arranged for long-term loans of laptops and hotspots, which families can pick up at their nearest MCL location. If requested, staff can meet them there, help them set everything up, and answer any questions. This arrangement takes some time and can be improved, but it goes a long way towards making participation possible.

Impact

Minerva spoke at length with a mom named Isabel about the positive impact that K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual has had on her family. “Before the pandemic, the library was my second home,” Isabel explains to Minerva in Spanish. “But after the libraries opened back up, we haven’t been able to go back the way we used to.” When she learned about the virtual tutoring program, she was excited to enroll her two daughters. Isabel shares that her family, like many others, has endured upheaval and trauma during COVID. The quality, one-on-one attention and positive encouragement from another adult who was not a parent was especially helpful to Isabel’s daughters.

“A Sofia la guió a lograr sus metas y se sentía mas preparada para la escuela,” says Isabel, which translates to “Sofia was guided to achieve her goals and she felt more prepared for school.” Knowing that her kids were receiving quality attention also made her feel good about herself as a mother. “It made me feel great knowing that I was helping my kids be prepared for the future, proud of them and proud of me too for finding this and coordinating it,” she continues. Above all else, she feels grateful. “Solo tengo mucho agradecimiento.” Even though it has been hard for Isabel to get back into the habit of visiting the library, she is appreciative that the library came to her, and brought meaningful services into her home.



In addition to having an impact on families, K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual has also been a meaningful experience for the volunteer tutors. At first, most of our tutors were local and had volunteered for the library before. Then one of our Spanish-speaking tutors moved across the country and wondered if she could continue volunteering from her time zone. This led to us accepting volunteer tutors from around the country. Many of our volunteers are retired, while others are college students whose schedules change every semester. We've even had a few high school students and a retired MCL librarian.

Before tutors take on their first student, they're required to attend an orientation with Jen and Minerva, where they can ask questions and get oriented with Zoom. They're required to be available between 4 to 6 pm on Tuesdays but have some flexibility with their tutoring time. As they work with each student, tutors are encouraged to share their progress via a student summary form. They're asked what they worked on today, what they want to work on next time, and anything else they'd like to share.

One thing becomes obvious while reading the student summaries: The tutors are building relationships with the students and starting to care about how they're doing. Many of them find meaning in this work. "The past year has been difficult for many people," shares one tutor. "I can only imagine what it's like for families with younger kids who are experiencing financial struggles. Since virtual tutoring is completely free, I think a lot of families who know about this program have a strong incentive to use it with their kids."

Says another tutor, "Virtual tutoring gives these students a platform to express themselves and an opportunity to hone their existing knowledge, whether it's math, science, or some neat piece of trivia about the longest bridge in the world. Where else would these kids go without this program?"

Moving Forward

MCL management has approved continuing K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual for the foreseeable future, though it hasn't always been easy. In the summer of 2021, the Home Learning Support Team was discontinued. Jen, Minerva, and I were reassigned to different positions with different supervisors. In the midst of staffing shortages, reopening plans, and management restructuring, we weren't sure if we were going to be able to continue staffing the service. Fortunately, Jen and Minerva presented qualitative and quantitative data to convince various levels of management of its impact on the community, and thankfully we were able to keep going. We were also able to keep growing. During the spring 2021 pilot session, we provided 20 students with six volunteer tutors. During the spring 2022 session just a year later, we coordinated weekly one-on-one tutoring for 62 students with 22 volunteer tutors.

Also, K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual didn't just grow; it expanded into a meaningful partnership between Portland State University (PSU) and Glenfair Elementary School, one of our priority schools. In the summer of 2021, a second-grade teacher at Glenfair contacted Jen about providing virtual tutoring for her whole class. Unfortunately, MCL didn't have enough staff and volunteers to accommodate her request. However, around the same time, Jen met with the head of PSU's Serve Your City program, which helps college students find volunteer opportunities to support the larger community. Eventually, Jen was able to start a pilot program to connect PSU students with the Glenfair students and

provide library-supported virtual (and eventually in-person) tutoring in reading. This next school year, PSU will take over coordination of the program, with MCL staff continuing to provide training and support.

Appreciation

Back in April of 2021, an overwhelmed and frustrated single father enrolled his first-grade daughter in K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual. She was falling behind because her reading skills had slipped since the start of the pandemic. After meeting weekly with her tutor from April to November 2021, she made significant progress. “Wanted to share the good news!” the father wrote in an email. “Just found out [student] made honor roll! After a stressful year plus of virtual learning [student] has come a LONG way and I am seeing a great deal of improvements. Thank you to the entire team that puts this together every week. This exhausted dad is very appreciative of the help and all can see the results.”

At the end of every six- or eight- week session of K–12 Virtual Tutoring/Tutoría Virtual, we hold volunteer appreciation parties, where we share statistics, feedback, challenges, and success stories. The volunteers especially appreciate the feedback, like the following, which reminds all of us why it is so important to continue this service:

- “Thank you for helping people who can’t afford it.”
- “Me encanta trabajar con ustedes ya que mi hija se siente con mucha confianza.” (Translated: “I love working with you as my daughter feels very confident.”)
- “Thank you so much. I really appreciate all you have done for my family.” 🙏

Conclusion

Back in the winter of 2020, in a meeting with the Home Learning Support Team, I remember asking ourselves, “Why us? Why should public libraries provide this kind of service? Can’t this work be done by nonprofits, community organizations, or even the schools themselves?” The answer came immediately. “Why not?” Access to tutoring is just like access to technology and all the other advantages the most privileged among us enjoy. Furthermore, it’s completely logical for families to come to us at the library as trusted advisors and experts on reading and writing. “It makes sense,” agrees Jen. “The library is about learning. Reading and writing are under our umbrella.”

Perhaps the most convincing argument for this service and others like it is that they’ve proven to create conditions for positive, meaningful relationship-building, which is beneficial for the students, families, tutors, and library staff. I’m hopeful and encouraged to read about the creation of tutoring corps in states like Oklahoma and Arkansas and other news about improving free, reliable access to academic support for those who need it.

References

Multnomah County Library. (2020, May). *Multnomah County library priorities*. <https://multcolib.org/about/priorities>

Multnomah County Library. (n.d.). *Register for K–12 virtual tutoring*. <https://multcolib.org/register-K-12-virtual-tutoring>



Further Reading

Belsha, K. (2022, March 25). Hiccups and hard lessons: What it takes to bring big new tutoring programs to America's classrooms. *Chalkbeat*. <https://tinyurl.com/mr48xrhe>

Kraft, M.A. & Falken, G. (2021, January). *A blueprint for scaling tutoring across public schools*. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. <https://edworkingpapers.com/ai20-335>

Hawkins, B. (2022, July 12). Tennessee students rebound to pre-pandemic reading proficiency. *The 74*. <https://tinyurl.com/3hx9sr5r>

