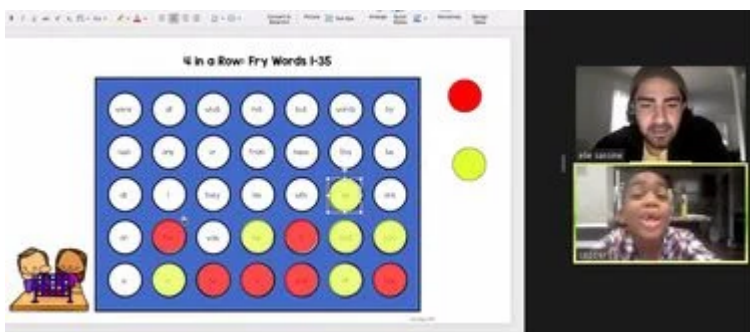


CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

BEST-MANAGED NONPROFITS

CRAIN'S 2020 BEST-MANAGED NONPROFIT



St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center

Volunteer tutor Elie Sassine from Troy works with Cooper Mitchell, a second-grader from Detroit, on the "Brain Break" educational game.

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St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center uses remote

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When schools shut down, afterschool tutoring for students in grades 1-5 and adult education programs at Detroit-based St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center shut down with them.

The closures couldn't have come at a worse time.

Tutoring for young students became even more important when the schools closed, and adults who hadn't graduated from high school faced an even more uncertain future with business closures, Executive Director Diane Renaud said.

As it began planning how it could continue its programs remotely, the center made well-being calls to students and families and provided referrals for food, unemployment assistance and other help.

Then it turned its attention to the education programs. It already had a small, online program in place for adult students. But demand spiked in the early weeks of the pandemic.

"They knew their jobs were likely not to come back, so they took advantage of the time off to complete their education," Renaud said.

It was serendipitous that the center had applied for grants to expand its online program before the pandemic. The grants came through at just the right time, quadrupling the number of "seats" in the online adult program from 30 to 120.

But only a third of adult and young students had online access.

So the center began looking for a way its volunteer educators and staff could use their own cell phones to do remote education and tutoring, without giving away their personal phone numbers. After settling on Google Voice, the nonprofit was able to quickly activate its existing volunteer corps.

It opened enrollment for adults and young students within a month of closing its centers. Soon, the registrations started coming in, and total online and remote enrollment in the adult education classes doubled to about 400 from 200 pre-pandemic. The center delivered customized GED-prep workbooks to adult students and reopened its main site for pre-testing and GED testing by appointment, after the state's initial stay-home orders were lifted.

So far, seven graduated during the pandemic, and another 20 are on track to obtain their GED by year's end.

Enrollment in the online afterschool tutoring for students in grades 1-5 was only about half of the 40 signed up for the program before the pandemic, Renaud said, noting online schooling burnout made it tough to keep students in the program.

Underpinning it all was an early decision made by the center's board — thanks to several with international ties — to defer an investment in order to increase its operating reserves from two months to five, as they saw the pandemic moving toward the U.S. The center,

which is operating on a \$1.47 million budget, is maintaining that five months' operating reserve, for now.

"We don't know what's going to happen," Renaud said.