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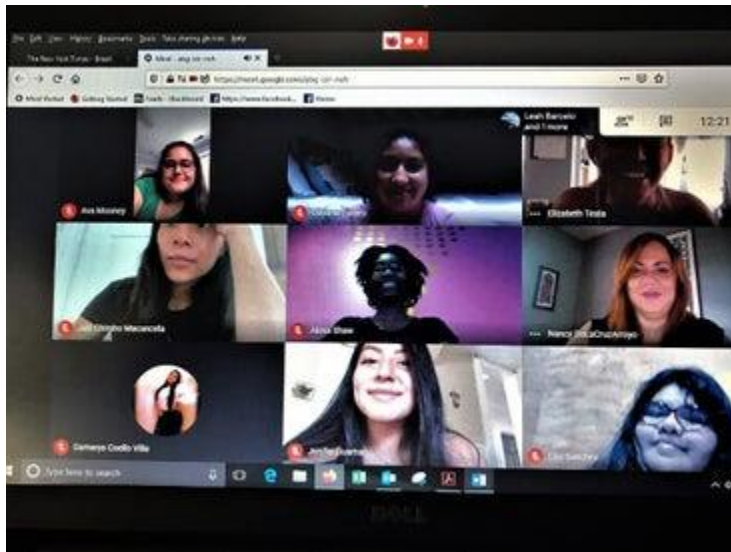
Schools

OHS Students Teach Young Peers through Summer Language Groups

About 126 families with children in kindergarten through sixth grade signed up for the program.

- **Cara Matthews, Community Contributor**
- Posted Mon, Aug 10, 2020 at 3:53 pm ET|Updated Mon, Aug 10, 2020 at 5:22 pm ET|

Reply



OHS Volunteers for Summer Language

Partner Groups met weekly to go over tips and strategies. (Ossining School District)

When rising Ossining High School senior Clio Sanchez was a young girl in Ecuador, she went on a trip to Disney World and other U.S. destinations. She became so excited about learning English that her parents gave her lessons as a gift. She spent three hours studying English every Friday for 2.5 years.

After two years in Ossining, Clio is giving the gift of her English and Spanish skills to children in kindergarten and grades 3 and 4 in the Summer Language Partner Groups pilot initiative. She has been teaching English to kindergarteners who are learning the language, and Spanish to third- and fourth-graders who are in the Dual Language Program.

"I love how kids are so passionate about it," Clio said. "They really like it. They're really practicing. At such young ages, they know a lot. What I like the most is they're engaged."

Nancy de la Cruz-Arroyo, director of bilingual and English as a new language programs, proposed the groups after receiving requests from parents who wanted children to practice their second language over the summer. Roughly 126 families with children in kindergarten through sixth grade signed up.

Throughout July, 23 OHS volunteers ran online practice groups of four to nine students each, said OHS English as a New Language teacher Elizabeth Testa, who helped run the program. She and Ms. de la Cruz-Arroyo created a structure and curriculum-related theme for each week as a guide. They encouraged volunteers to be creative and have fun. Many made slideshows for their students and played games with them to help build vocabulary.

"The volunteers really took ownership of their groups and it's always great to see what they come up with," Ms. Testa said, adding that they met with students for at least a half hour twice a week. "We really wanted it to be kind of a student-led program that engages our teens with younger kids in our community."

A lot of the volunteers learned English as a new language or went through the Dual Language Program and are now in high school. "It's kind of a way to give back to the program," she said.

The district is considering continuing the Language Practice Groups during the school year.

Volunteers met virtually once a week to share their experiences and teaching strategies. During a recent meeting, Ms. de la Cruz-Arroyo said she had heard from parents who are grateful for the program and volunteers.

It is a difficult summer for families because of the pandemic, and many children are not spending a lot of time outside their homes. "So to be able to have this opportunity to engage with someone that they probably look up to and to practice their language and see their friends – because they're seeing you but they're also seeing their friends or making new friends in the Dual Language Program – I think that's amazing," she said.

Alexa Shaw, a rising junior, said she volunteered because it was a great opportunity to keep up with Spanish and pass along her knowledge to younger students. "As a non-native Spanish speaker in the Dual Language Program, I would have loved the opportunity to converse with an older student," she said.

Alexa said running a group forced her to think creatively to keep everyone engaged and having fun. She worked with students entering grades 2 and 3. One of their favorite games involved Alexa saying a color in Spanish, and students would have to find something that was the same color.

Rising junior Katherin Vera said she was excited to run a group because she wants to be a teacher. She worked with fifth- and sixth-graders on their Spanish. "It's been amazing. The kids are amazing. They learn super-fast, which is great," she said.

"I actually love being in front of them and seeing their faces and how excited they get when they learn something new," she added.

Katherin came to the United States from Ecuador six years ago and had to learn English, and she often reaches out to new students in similar situations.

"Being bilingual is very important to me," she said, adding that she feels strongly about using her abilities to assist other people. "If we know it, we need to help others."

Clio said she wants to be a social worker or school counselor and work with children. Her grandmother, a school principal in Ecuador who gave her whole heart to the job, inspires her.

"I'm just like her. I want to be the person who's going to plant the seed for them to become something bigger," she said. "I want to inspire them. I want them to dream, to want to be something big."