

## Cluster Pivots to Support Students During Global Pandemic

For thirty years Cluster Tutoring has provided in-person one-to-one tutoring to students in under-resourced communities on the West Side of Chicago. The close relationships that develop between the tutor and student have provided a basis for success in learning and life.

This year, the COVID 19 pandemic disrupted Cluster's traditional model for achieving this success. In March, the increased risk of exposure to this virus necessitated a change. Cluster needed to maintain its primary mission while pivoting to a new format. Unprecedented economic and academic challenges contributed to the decision to direct energy and resources toward new ways to support the Cluster community of students and their families.

Here are some of the ways in which Cluster has been supporting our students:

- This summer **Cluster** offered a six-week virtual intensive Summer Reading Program led by professional teachers. Eighteen students who faced significant reading challenges were able to benefit from this program.
- Twenty-eight students participated in summer math enrichment through a partnership Cluster developed with Mathnasium in Oak Park. The program is continuing through the school year.
- Cluster's initial focus was to provide students with the necessary technology for successful remote learning. A needs assessment was completed by Cluster families and, on the basis of this information, students were provided with equipment including Chromebooks and printers.
- This effort to fully equip students with technology has continued throughout the year with additional resources being added which include printer ink, workbooks and books. Students in grades K through Fifth have also received a full bag of school supplies for remote learning.

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*"I find myself short on words trying to describe the gratitude I have for Cluster and the supreme, caring spirit you have. Dillon and I are very grateful for what Cluster has done for us. We received the printer. We appreciate you!" - Cluster Parent.*



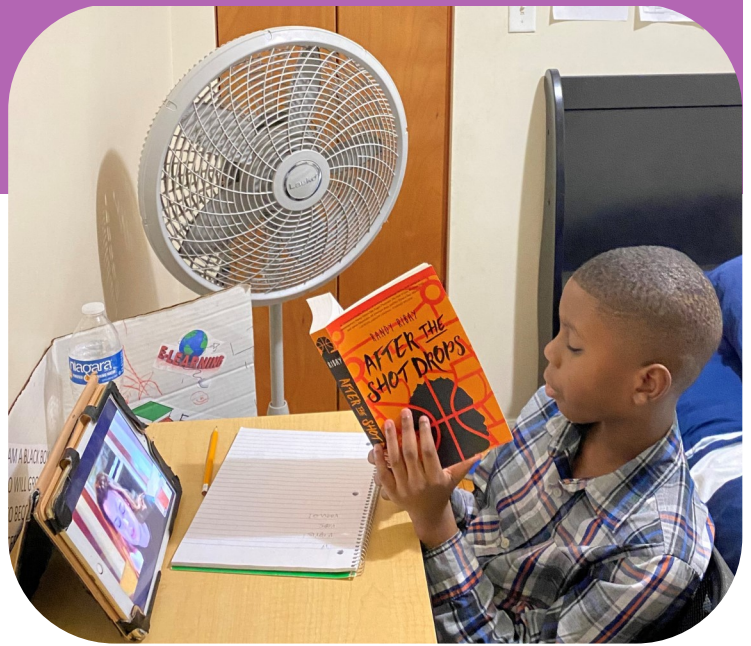
Tutoring may look different now that we are 100% on-line, but we look forward to resuming in-person tutoring as soon as it is safe to do so.



## Tutoring Looks Different but Interest and Need Remain High

Although we are in the midst of a pandemic, **79%** of Cluster's students and tutors have opted to continue tutoring this fall! Pairs meet virtually at least once per week. In addition to helping students with their homework, tutors provide critical social and emotional support during this challenging time. Together, students and tutors are navigating the new "normal." The tutoring pairs meet weekly via Zoom, Google Meet, or Facetime. They focus on homework and reinforcement of classroom lessons introduced during remote learning. Tutors also offer additional homework help at various times throughout the week. Since many tutors now work from home, the tutoring sessions are scheduled at times most convenient for tutors and students.

Together, tutors and students are finding ways to stay connected. Cluster also created an online forum where volunteers can share resources and ideas on how to best support student learning. Virtual tutoring has allowed the beneficial relationships to persist. The important value of human connection has been maintained despite not being able to meet in person.



*Cluster Student Jerron with his tutor Hadley. They have been working together since he was in Kindergarten.*

*"I've been tutoring Jerron on Thursday nights for the past five years. Watching him grow into a most capable and bright young man has been such a joy. Jerron is also one of the funniest people I know, he's always making me laugh. During the pandemic, we have been meeting up on Zoom once a week to read and study vocabulary words together. Meeting with Jerron is one of the highlights of my week!"*

*- Hadley, Tutor*

## Help with Math is Critical for Cluster's Students



In its effort to respond to and support the Black Lives Matter movement, the **Mathnasium of Oak Park** re-established its partnership with Cluster during the summer of 2020. Cluster students have access to weekly math enrichment sessions that supplement their Cluster tutoring sessions. Students work with Mathnasium staff on Sunday afternoons in virtual sessions. Based upon the results of an assessment, students focus on either Basic Numerical Fluency, Multiplication Mastery, or receive an Introduction to Algebra. Currently, 28 students are benefiting from Cluster's partnership with Mathnasium.

*Cluster Student Nia practicing multiplication facts. The facts are written on the outside of cups. She gets the cup to build with if she answers the math fact correctly. She got all the cups!*

**THE MISSION OF CLUSTER TUTORING** is to help students realize their potential through the power of learning in an environment that strengthens the student, the tutor, and the community.



# Graduation from High School – Off to College, Remotely!



Micah Baker started her freshman year at Howard University a lot differently than she thought she would. Micah expected to be at Howard’s Hilltop campus in Washington, D.C., by now. Instead, the Cluster Tutoring graduate is learning this semester the same way as many other students across the country — all of the material is being taught remotely.

Micah attended Cluster since kindergarten, working with three different tutors over the 13 years. When she started high school, she gained a veteran tutor in Nell Lurain, who had tutored Micah’s brother, William, for eight years before that. When William graduated, Nell switched siblings.

Nell called both William and Micah excellent students and said both were “very organized and a pleasure to work with.” “They were cut out of the same block,” with lots of support at home from their mother, so that’s why they did so well, Nell said. “Micah liked tutoring. She didn’t want to play games.”

Micah said Nell always went “the extra mile. When I took physics, she bought the physics book to read a chapter ahead so she could explain things.”

Micah said she ultimately chose Howard because the school offered a good financial package. She also earned three scholarships, “so I’ve been able to pay off my whole first year.” “Although I’m sad about being home, it works out financially,” she added.



*Long-time tutor Nell Lurain has tutored four students with Cluster since 2006. Nell serves on the Cluster Board of Directors.*

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# Feeding Cluster's Students

The majority of Cluster's students reside in "food deserts" where access to fresh produce and healthy food is limited. This problem is exacerbated by the pandemic.

In response, Cluster has partnered with **Forty Acres Fresh Market** to deliver boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables to Cluster's families who are most in need. Parents can order a produce box up to two times per month throughout the school year. We anticipate continuing this effort even after the pandemic is over. Not only is Cluster supporting local families with healthy food, we are also supporting a great local business established in response to the lack of healthy food options on Chicago's West Side.



Funding for this effort has been provided through Hunger Walkathon West's annual Crop Walk. This year's **Crop Walk** was like no other, proving that generosity is alive and well even when it all happens remotely. According to Amy Stearns, Cluster Board Member and Crop Walk volunteer, "The event raised more money than ever before largely because people have heightened awareness of food insecurity and food desperation impacting a large part of our community during the pandemic." A big thank you to the organizers, walkers, donors, and other supporters of the CROP Hunger Walk. Its subsidiary, Hunger Walkathon West, gave Cluster a much appreciated donation of \$4,803, which we are using to feed Cluster's students and their families.



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# Virtual Seminars for Students and Parents

Cluster has continued to offer a variety of seminars for the Cluster community of students, parents and volunteers. Most recently, former Cluster Executive Director Kathy McCabe gave a presentation on navigating the CPS High School Application Process. Students were familiarized with the array of options including Selective Enrollment Schools, Charter Schools, International Baccalaureate Schools and neighborhood schools. The application process, which can be quite daunting, was fully reviewed and questions and concerns were addressed. Kathy McCabe brings years of expertise both personally and professionally to this topic.

Annually, Cluster hosts at least two seminars during the school year, one for parents and the other for tutors and their students. Past topics have included paying for college, math and reading activities to do at home, caring for students impacted by trauma, and career exploration nights for middle and high school students.

## With Sincere Gratitude...

- ◆ **First United Church of Oak Park for donating tutoring space**
- ◆ **Beyond Hunger for donating healthy snacks for students**
- ◆ **Circle Urban Ministries for waiving rent payments during the pandemic**
- ◆ **250 donors who generously support Cluster annually with financial gifts**
- ◆ **150 Cluster tutors and volunteers who donate their time, talent and friendship every week to serve Cluster's students, even during the pandemic**

## Contact Us

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