**South London learning mentors provide support for disadvantaged young people throughout pandemic challenges.**

*S was in her last year of secondary school and was predicted to fail her Maths GCSE. She has dyslexia and was receiving extra support but it was inconsistent and not always suitable to her needs. S’s mum is a single parent and works 50 hours a week to make ends meet. She didn't feel able to support her daughter academically.*

*S’s mum said: “I struggled with Maths at school and came out with no grades. I see history repeating itself, and I am very worried S will go through what I went through. I want a better life for S.”*

*S was referred to Rathbone’s mentoring program through a friend who was getting the support of a Learning Mentor. Her predicted Maths grade at the beginning of the academic year was 1.5, or a U/no grade. In October 2019, S was matched with a mentor to help her and the extra support led to her increasing her grades by over 3 marks. During the February 2020 mock exams, S was predicted a 4, or a pass in her GCSE’s.*

Rathbone Youth Centre is a unique charity that runs inclusive programmes for young people with SEND (special educational needs and disability) and mainstream young people in West Norwood. The Centre delivers a Learning Mentor project where local people volunteer an hour a week to support disadvantaged young people - those eligible for free school meals - with their learning. Rathbone’s Learning Mentor project works with local schools to identify young people struggling with their learning and/or having difficult relationships with their learning and their school.

Ibtisam Adem, the Youth Engagement Workervisits local schools to identify young people for the programme. She said: “The learning mentor programme is a real example of a community coming together to support its disadvantaged members and making a difference in young people’s lives”

*J, a student from Norwood School said: “When Ibtisam came to my school and spoke to Miss, I said I didn’t want to do it, but later on I came here to meet my mentor and she was so nice. Even though I was a bit rude to her in the beginning, she still wanted to help me. The next time I came in we got through so much work! I am very grateful for all the time my mentor and Ibtisam gave me. I have gone from a U (no grade) to a 4 already! I just wish I had this last year too!”*

The mentoring sessions offer a safe and non-judgemental space where young people can discuss their anxieties and the barriers they face towards learning and their future. Through the supportive and trusting relationships built with their mentors, young people improve their engagement with their schools, change their attitudes towards their learning, achieve and exceed their predicted grades and are able to formulate a vision for their future.

The effect of the programme on the young people has been very positive: “I’ve learnt so much more in the last three months than in my four years of secondary school”

*Parents have also seen an improvement first-hand. LE’s child had been receiving support from a learning mentor: “I can’t thank Rathbone enough for helping my son. We want to help him but we don’t understand half of the stuff he brings home. English is not our first language so everything seems complicated. We know he has potential and I think he is starting to realise that now that he has the right support!”*

Due to the current pandemic, the mentoring sessions are going ahead online via Zoom. This has brought its own challenges and highlighted another aspect of poverty - digital poverty, or digital exclusion. Young people from disadvantaged families cannot always afford a computer or laptop with connection to the internet. Where there is a computer, it is often shared between siblings and other family members. Some computers don’t have cameras that work and a quiet study space at home is not possible in a lot of cases.

To try and meet these challenges, Rathbone has fundraised to buy laptops and lends these to young people in need. Those without a quiet space to study at home use a space at Rathbone’s offices and are provided with a laptop there. They’ve also partnered with local businesses like Lambeth Tech Aid who kindly donates refurbished laptops. However, the key to the successful project are the dedicated learning mentors.

*The mentors themselves have found the programme very rewarding “I have really enjoyed supporting my mentee. He is such a delightful young man. It is very rewarding to be able to help a young person that lives in my local area and see him progress both academically and personally. Amidst all the negative press it’s great to see that there are still some really bright and amazing young people!” said A.L, a mentor since January 2019.*

Rathbone Youth Centre is always looking for volunteers who would like to make a difference to Young People. If this is you, don’t hesitate to get in contact for more information.

**For more information, please email Ibtisam Adem on** [i.adem@rathbonesociety.org.uk](mailto:i.adem@rathbonesociety.org.uk)

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