

Student volunteers hours of online homework help

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ORANGE PARK – Ridgeview High School might have the most helpful Algebra I student in the state and he won a prize because of it.

By racking up the most karma points on Algebra Nation, a math website where students can complete homework and tutor others, freshman Matthew Rodriguez earned himself a free iPad. Each month, Algebra Nation tracks its users' karma points and whoever has the most at the end of the month wins an iPad. Karma points are earned by helping other users, which are also Florida students, with algebra problems.

“Algebra Nation doesn’t just let students say, ‘here’s the answer,’” Rodriguez’s Algebra I Honors teacher Amber Amato said. “If they do that, the post will get removed and the student will be told not to just give out answers but instead,

help them work through the problem to get the answer.”

According to Amato, Rodriquez helped other students in Florida on Algebra Nation 70 times, which earned him 8,900 karma points.

“It helps me prepare for class more and I’m helping other kids prepare as well,” said Rodriquez, explaining why he strives to help so many. “It was never really about the iPad for me.”

The 2017-18 school year marks Amato’s fifth year teaching Algebra I and no tool has been more helpful for teaching the subject than Algebra Nation.

“It’s a really great thing for these kids to have and use,” Amato said. “They are working on their math skills while helping others, all while being incentivized by a prize to do more and logging volunteer hours. It’s so helpful.”

The EOC, or End of Course, exams of Amato’s students have been the highest they’ve ever been in the past five years and she gives a lot of the credit to Algebra Nation. Developed by the University of Florida and launched in 2013, Algebra Nation sought to help kids pass Algebra I, which according to the Algebra Nation website, is a key gateway to higher-level math courses and high-growth careers.

Since its launch, the Florida passing rate of Algebra I has increased by 7 percent. Even if the use of the program wasn’t recommended by the school, Amato believes that she would still be using it in her classroom, citing how resourceful and helpful it’s been in filling in the gaps in between lessons. She said it’s both for those students who are struggling and those who might not be.

“If you’re struggling, there’s expert professionals on the boards to help as well as the students like Matthew,” Amato said. “If you’re not struggling, there’s still incentive to go help which, in turn, helps you.”

Having won an iPad, Rodriquez no longer qualifies to win the prize again but that hasn’t stopped him from finding a place back on the boards helping students. If he finishes his homework early, he’ll hop on the Algebra Nation boards for a bit and do what he can to help those in need.

“It feels really good knowing that I was able to get the iPad just for helping kids out,” Rodriquez said, smiling at the brand-new Apple device in his hands. “It really isn’t about the iPad though. It’s about just helping people out and knowing that maybe they passed a test or got a 100 on an assignment because I helped them.”