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We're Giving Visually Impaired Students Lessons to Succeed

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Three years ago, Miami-Dade County Public Schools launched a Million-Dollar Community Literacy Challenge for adults in our community who had not finished high school.

The Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired received a grant from M-DCPS for adult education teachers to teach at Miami Lighthouse. Their mission: Help blind adults study for their GED. We were astonished to learn that 44 percent of the more than 2,000 Miami Lighthouse clients in the adult vision rehabilitation program did not have a high school diploma regardless of where they attended school. This led us to focus on the other end of the spectrum - the very youngest of visually impaired learners who may be at risk of not finishing high school.

Building upon the success of the Adult Education collaboration, Miami Lighthouse, the school system and the Early Learning Coalition launched a pilot pre-kindergarten. It is the first of its kind in the United States, with half of the 3- and 4-year-olds being sighted - typical early learners - and half visually impaired.

In a few school districts, a pre-kindergarten for visually impaired 3- and 4-year-olds adds a small percentage of sighted siblings and peers; however, a full inclusion pre-kindergarten is unique in that it includes an equal number of visually impaired and sighted students. As stated at the recent Topping Off ceremony for the new Lighthouse Learning Center building, slated for completion in August, "Inclusion means no barriers and no isolation."

Demonstrating the importance of inclusion, a mother of one of the sighted 4-year-olds in the pilot pre-kindergarten said "When our family watched the Helen Keller movie, our son asked 'What is blind?' " She told him, "You know, you go to school with blind children." Her son replied "No, I don't. We are all the same."

In collaboration with the University of Miami Department of Psychology, 1- and 2-year-old preschoolers and pre-kindergarten students in the Miami Lighthouse early learning inclusion program will be followed until they enter first grade as part of a four-year longitudinal study funded by The Children's Trust. The primary goal is to examine effects of implementing the Lighthouse Learning Center for Children™ inclusion model on participating children, parents, and teachers. University of Miami researchers will evaluate best practices within the inclusive early childhood setting to:

- Assess both short term (school year) and longitudinal (four-year) outcomes for children and families in the early childhood inclusion program.
- Continuously inform and improve the model throughout each school year.
- Develop and demonstrate best practices to be replicated in Miami-Dade County and the United States.

Miami Lighthouse and Miami-Dade County Public Schools are confident that students in this program will become CEOs, social workers, attorneys,

teachers, and computer scientists. By increasing visually impaired early learners' probability of success, these students will have a sound footing to achieve along with their sighted peers, complete high school and post-secondary training, including college, and ultimately pursue competitive integrated employment.



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You can find the direct link to the op-ed here: [We're giving visually impaired students lessons to succeed](#)