

# A New Paradigm for Early Education: Opening doors through virtual kindergarten

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While the COVID-19 vaccines bring hope about the end of pandemic-related closures, leaders worldwide recognize that a fundamental shift has occurred in the way we work, live, and learn. Though we will always need brick-and-mortar schools, our “new normal” must include hybrid and virtual education options for students who do not have access to safe and healthy classrooms. The consequences of not making this shift will place an at-risk generation further behind their peers.

At Pathways Early Education Center of Immokalee, in Florida, our educators are constantly looking for new ways to engage the children and the families in the migrant farm-working community. As we discussed strategies to safely bring the children back into the classroom, we considered the option of enhanced virtual classes for our pre-kindergarten students. We were seeking a way to keep students who needed to quarantine for two weeks from falling behind their peers.

But then we thought, What if the solution for our enrolled students could benefit more at-risk children? What if it could help the center – at maximum capacity before the pandemic with 125 enrolled students – reach the 500 children still on our waiting list?

In Fall 2020, we launched a pilot virtual pre-kindergarten program with five students who were unable to return in person. Our team was challenged to create a program following four guidelines:

- 1) Be safe and accessible to families without internet access.
- 2) Keep the young children engaged and excited about learning.
- 3) Show demonstrable improvements in language and literacy.
- 4) Ensure the virtual students feel like they are a part of the real classroom.

Preliminary results from the pilot program are positive. While in-person learners have seen greater gains in literacy and math skills, virtual pre-kindergarten students are seeing more positive gains in fine motor skills. Both in-person and virtual pre-kindergarten students will be more prepared with essential skills to succeed in kindergarten than children who have not had access to early education.

## **An Overwhelming Need for Early Education**

In June 2019, Governor DeSantis shared the startling fact that 42% of children in Florida’s Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program were not prepared to advance into kindergarten. The statistics are likely much higher in communities like Immoka-

## Educators Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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lee, Florida, where the poverty rate is over 50%. It is estimated that close to 1,100 underserved children don't have access to early learning opportunities. It is important to note that due to the mobility of our migrant farmworkers, the number of children in need fluctuates at the change of every season. Pathways' waiting list consistently has been over 500 children; these children are waiting to gain access to the skills they need for a lifetime of learning.

While legislators have been making efforts to improve access to early education, Florida's youngest students were dealt another blow when schools were forced to shut down in the spring of 2020. With unemployment at record highs, the hard-working families bringing their children to Pathways have been struggling to provide essentials such as food and household items. Many of the families were also directly impacted by the coronavirus, with multiple family members becoming ill. Also, the ongoing pandemic meant several families struggled with the decision of whether or not to send their children to an in-person VPK program, because of underlying health conditions.

Unfortunately, "re-opening" schools wasn't as simple as unlocking the doors. With the added costs of new safety policies and reduced class sizes, Pathways was forced to re-organize staffing and reduce the number of children in the Changing the Path program by 32%. Though grants offset some of the costs, our team was devastated by the possibility of any of our children being left behind socially or academically.

### **Innovating a Virtual Pre-Kindergarten Classroom**

A simple idea about connectivity rapidly expanded into reality, re-invigorating our team with a challenge to help more children. Through grants from Empower ED by T-Mobile and the Cares Act, families were provided with a tablet, a mobile hotspot, and child-secured internet service. Each morning,

virtual pre-kindergarten students join their partner in-person classroom for circle time. Through interactive technology, virtual students are introduced to all of the children and engage in the center's literacy-based Early Literacy and Learning Model Curriculum. In addition to time with the in-person class, virtual students have small-group time with each other and their teacher to focus on language and literacy skills. The Pathways' model provides 3 to 4 hours of engagement with virtual students each day, spread throughout the morning and afternoon to be developmentally appropriate for the age of the children.

All students participate in the activities as well as give and receive feedback. Interactive activities like listening for rhyming words by simply putting a thumb up or down can help a child with phonological awareness. Or when the teacher holds up an object, the student will point to the letter that represents the beginning sound of that object.

Molly Skidmore, the school's virtual pre-kindergarten teacher, described a recent success story. During one activity, she asked the virtual students to find an object around their house that started with the letter "J." One boy who was struggling with letter recognition received help from another student, who held up a paper to show what the letter "J" looked like and suggested he go bring back jelly. The little boy was excited to have the answer, but perhaps more excited about receiving support from his peers. He entered the virtual pre-kindergarten program only recognizing the first letter of his own name; a few short months later, his letter recognition had increased significantly.

Another important keystone for a child's success and readiness for kindergarten is social-emotional development. Through the interactive program, they can see, hear, and interact with children their own age and build the confidence to express



themselves. They learn social awareness and how to be patient while another child is talking, they learn to be flexible when technical issues arise, and they create social bonds by being engaged in discussions and activities.

Skidmore describes the growth one student in particular experienced as she connected to her classmates. Initially, she was very shy and would simply observe other students rather than engaging with them. A few days into the program, however, she lit up with excitement when the students were asked to bring an item to the virtual classroom for show and tell. She ran to another room and brought back a toy pony. She shared a story about how it was a recent birthday present from her parents. Being able to bring something to the class discussion helped her overcome her shyness. Virtual learning provided her a safe place to express herself, and she was able to step out of her comfort zone. She now regularly participates and engages with her peers.

During a virtual learning program, students also have fewer disruptions and a teacher who is exclusively focused on those students. Even though they are miles apart from their teacher, the intimacy of seeing each other in a home setting, with family members, has created stronger bonds than expected. Skidmore is a partner with the families as they work together to further each child's development.

### Measurable Results

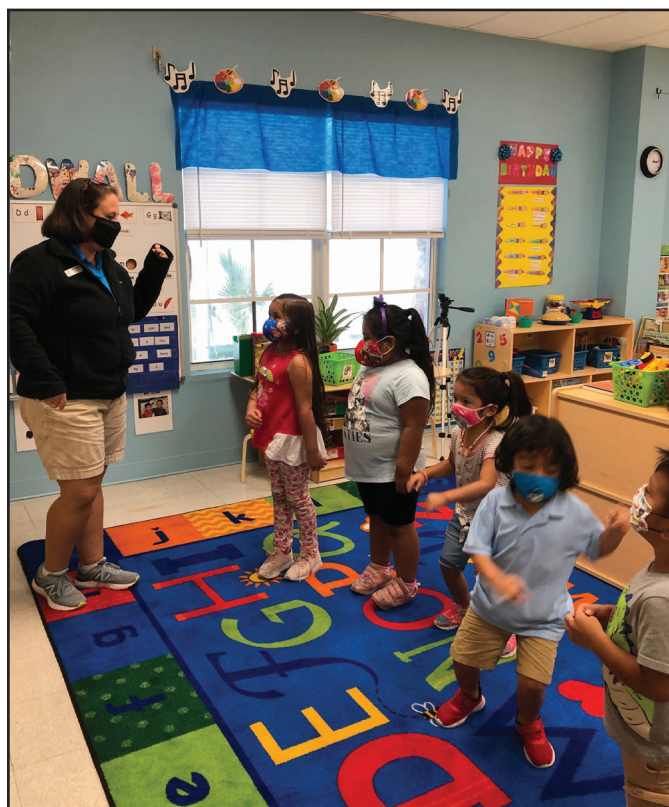
Throughout the year, virtual students have the same benchmark assessments and individualized Pathways Plan to overcome developmental delays. While all of the students enrolled in Pathways have demonstrated some regression since the school was shut down with the pandemic, positive gains have been identified across the board. In-person students have seen stronger gains in literacy and math benchmark exams, but virtual students have seen stronger fine motor growth. Overall, most students are meeting expectations or are on track to meeting expectations for the year. The benchmarks in the table to the right are from September and November 2020.

Currently, the school has the equipment and staffing for 10 more students in the virtual pre-kindergarten program. With families regularly applying for the school waiting list, parents are encouraged to join the virtual program. As long as children have a consistent caregiver committed to the program, Pathways will enroll children who otherwise would go to the end of the waiting list.

With the existing curriculum, it takes \$500 per student to provide the necessary equipment. Additional teacher salaries will also be required, but the overall expense is much less than an in-person program. As a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Pathways relies on grants and donations to provide tuition assistance, teacher salaries, and enriching hands-on activities through a nationally recognized curriculum to Change the Path for Immokalee's next generation.

	Virtual Pre-Kindergarten	In-Person Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten
<b>Literacy</b>		
• Meeting Expectations	37.5%	35%
• On Track	25%	41%
• Below Expectations	37.5%	24%
<b>Math</b>		
• Meeting Expectations	—	38%
• On Track	66%	26%
• Below Expectations	34%	36%
<b>Fine Motor</b>		
• Meeting Expectations	75%	38%
• On Track	8%	33%
• Below Expectations	17%	29%

For more information on how you can help Change the Path, visit [www.PathwaysEarlyEducation.org](http://www.PathwaysEarlyEducation.org). They develop the right skills to adapt to rapidly changing work landscapes. "Development is improved productivity, and that, as far as I can tell, is largely the quality of the labor force," says Eric. "Quality drives growth, and not the other way around."



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