

Best educators kept students on track during the pandemic

By ABRAHAM GALVAN

Throughout the pandemic, educators took on the challenge to keep students on track and aligned with not only their school curriculum but their overall well-being.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, charter schools like **KIPP Miami** have built a robust mental health awareness curriculum that offers families a safe space to access resources and information that support every child’s emotional development, said Sonya Belletti, executive director of the Bayview Foundation.

From restorative justice circles to morning affirmation sessions, KIPP’s educators are leading the way in empowering students to become agents of their mental health while strengthening their toolkits to combat everyday stressors that overwhelmingly affect Black and brown youth, she said.

“It was no surprise that when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, KIPP Miami’s educators adapted to the new normal by channeling more resources for our children and recognizing that in times of crises, students – and their families – need wraparound services that extend beyond the school buildings,” Ms. Belletti said. “Throughout the last year, KIPP teachers have volunteered their time to safely tutor students from the comfort of their front porches and have developed special programming.”

KIPP Miami is part of the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) national nonprofit network of college-preparatory public charter schools educating elementary, middle, and high school students. Founded in 2018, KIPP Miami operates three nonprofit charter schools in Miami, providing an educational alternative to communities in Liberty City and Little West River.

In conjunction with Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the charter school launched its hybrid learning providing students with more than 350 Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots directly to families at their homes, said Debbie Bias, KIPP Miami’s director of community engagement, which “ensure that they have not only the materials they need, but also the Internet access to do virtual learning.”

Over 185 learning kits filled with school supplies and basic supplies that students and families would need to do the remote learning have



Gareth Pearson used a \$1,000 grant for 20 student smartphones to access digital learning platforms fast.



Debbie Bias from KIPP Miami.

been distributed along with weekly food deliveries.

“We had telehealth counseling provided to students who would have had that service already on either their individualized education plans, or just needed extra additional support,” Ms. Bias said. “So, we had a couple of students engaging in counseling online and on the phone, not only with their teachers but with their mental health counselors as well.”

Finding ways to address inner-city students who don’t necessarily have those equitable resources or not given the same opportunities as other students, Miami Central Senior High instructional coach Angel Robinson said she saw great potential in **Kalyn Lee** and took her under her wing while working together at Miami Carol City Senior High School.

“I just made sure I connected her with the right people within the community and the school system that understands her motive, pas-

sion and ensuring that those inner-city kids get what they need while being diplomatic at the same time,” Ms. Robinson said.

Now at Miami Edison Senior High School as an instructional coach, Ms. Lee has become one of the main educators making sure that students are coming to school and working with other school sites to make sure that students have the proper technology that was needed this past school year.

“I work with both students and teachers in order to make sure that our kids are prepared for the state assessment,” she said. “So, I worked very heavily with the kids where I pull them out for intervention purposes. I am also responsible for the movement of all of those students, as it relates to their test scores and making sure that they’re not regressing and making sure that they are graduation ready.”

Outside of teaching, Ms. Lee said, she has created an Instagram account called Free Game 1202, a one-stop-shop where teachers and students can check out scholarship opportunities, college preparation resources and a platform to discuss issues within the school community.

“I have hosted a number of town halls where people can come in and talk about some of the issues that are happening within the community so that we can go back and collectively discuss those particular issues to make sure that the kids and the community have the things that they need,” said Ms. Lee, who



Instructional coach Kalyn Lee.

was recently named rookie teacher of the year. “The page is designed to push out information that’s relevant to students like community service and current scholarship opportunities.”

Free Game 1202 is not just for Edison students, she said, but for any student in Miami-Dade County, “which is super important because we’re trying to keep our kids visible,” Ms. Lee said.

When selecting and awarding Miami-Dade County teachers with educational grants, Education Fund



President Linda Lecht said, she looks for and encourages works that improve education and promotes innovation in the classroom.

“I ask teachers to come up with new ways to excite students to learn, especially, hands-on,” Ms. Lecht said. “**Gareth Pearson** is one of our teachers and he’s a shining example of how teachers come up with some of the best ideas and are willing to go the extra mile to actually try them out with their students.”

Mr. Pearson, who is a seventh-grade math teacher at Fienberg-Fisher K-8 Center in Miami Beach, was one of about 400 teachers who received a \$1,000 grant from The Education Fund. Mr. Pearson said he decided to use the grant for a class set of 20 smartphones with cover cases for durability.

“The idea is to have something simple where the students can complete their work on. It doesn’t need to be the latest iPhone, it just needs to serve the function that we’re using in the classroom and access digital learning platforms very quickly,” he said.

Students are directed to a website where Mr. Pearson said he publishes the material or assignments. Over 80 students who are benefiting from the smartphone sets simply scan a QR code and commence their math activities or study reviews.

“It’s just something practical to help with the difficulties or restrictions covid has presented,” he said, “and help keep all the class on track, focused on the same page.”

WELCOME TO THE BEST OF MIAMI

This special supplement to Miami Today focuses on individuals, companies and organizations that make special strides and efforts to improve the community they work in and serve. We collectively label them the Best of Miami – as we have for more than three decades.

In a community as large and as diverse as Greater Miami there is no way to select scientifically. These selections represent a cross-section of highly qualified nominees who are among the best in the community.



Ussery Automotive Group is proud to join *Miami Today* in celebrating “The Best of Miami” and all our beautiful city has to offer.



Mercedes-Benz of Coral Gables
Mercedes-Benz of Cutler Bay

USSERY AUTOMOTIVE GROUP