



**COVID Education Innovation  
in Florida:** Top 10 Takeaways



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**June 2021**

Amid all the disruption caused by the pandemic, we believe discoveries of new ways of doing things emerged that might be worth holding on to. We heard this anecdotally from colleagues in other education organizations along with concern that no one was capturing and sharing those discoveries in Florida.

Florida's local education foundations are all about innovating learning, powering potential and celebrating success. So, we decided a contribution we could make on a state level was to put out a call to education innovators through our network and partner organizations. We asked people to share practice, program and policy changes they implemented out of necessity that they think are worth holding on to post-pandemic.

We received 177 submissions from December 2020 through April 2021. In reviewing them, we found some cross-cutting themes we believe could be useful to people involved in various aspects of K-12 education, from classroom teachers and school administrators to program coordinators and district leaders. As you read through our **Top Ten Takeaways**, you'll see citations of 30 specific submissions with clickable links so you can learn more and even contact the education innovator directly.

One clarification: The term "innovation" is often used interchangeably with "invention." Most of the innovations we heard about are not entirely new inventions. They are more about applying an existing process or technology to accomplish a goal in a new way. Also, most of the innovations do involve leveraging technology in new ways so they are reliant upon digital equity for everyone in our school communities. Because adequate digital access and support become the linchpins upon which most of our remaining big takeaways rely, we begin our report with some great efforts happening around our state in this area.

We are grateful to everyone who found a few precious minutes to share what they are learning with us. As a noneducator, I stand in awe of the daily efforts to minimize and manage the disruption of the past 16 months. I offer this report humbly, knowing that we have captured only a fraction of the great work happening throughout our state but hopeful that we can spark some productive conversations for local school communities as we move forward together for students.

Sincerely,

Mary Chance  
President and CEO

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# Our Top 10 Takeaways

## 1 The Digital Divide Remains a Major Equity Issue

**Nearly all innovations in our report require everyone has adequate digital access and skills.**

School districts, local education foundations and other community partners mobilized overnight in March 2020, stepping into the gap with device drives and creative connectivity workarounds such as hotspots deployed to neighborhoods on school buses and funding data plans for families in need. With federal American Rescue Plan funds now buoying school district budgets, having 1:1 digital device distribution is becoming more commonplace. But this may end up being the easiest of the three aspects of the Digital Divide to solve. Ensuring families consistently have access to adequate, cost-effective broadband and the knowledge, skills and support to effectively engage online are not quick-fix solutions.



Two education innovations we learned about involved comprehensive community solutions and offer powerful models for other communities to consider.

The Palm Beach County Access for All Digital Inclusion Initiative involves more than 40 government, philanthropic and business partners working together with a sense of urgency on one lofty goal: Create and implement a sustainable solution that brings broadband service to densely populated areas where 25,000 students report they don't have internet access.

Together, they leveraged more than \$60 million in funding to build a Wi-Fi Mesh Network in historically underserved communities within a 50-square-mile area. They prioritized their construction plans by overlaying a "heat map" indicating populations of students on the Federal Free/Reduced Lunch Program and survey data on families reporting a lack of internet service. Proposed rewrite: Palm Beach County, other municipalities and the school district were willing to commit significant federal COVID relief funding to the initiative. That commitment and their willingness to work with community partners on construction and implementation were keys to getting liftoff.

Leaders of the initiative point to the sustainability factor in opting for this solution. Once construction is complete, there is no monthly internet service provider charge for families. The Wi-Fi Range Extenders cost \$35 - \$75 per household and last about 5-7 years. The Education Foundation of Palm Beach County focused on this part of the effort, raising \$1 million in private funds for the Wi-Fi extenders.

[\(#39 – Adam Miller, Palm Beach County Public Schools\)](#)

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Hillsborough Education Foundation leaders stepped up early in the pandemic to work with their school district in forming a Digital Equity Team and the Tech Connect Initiative. Families' lack of understanding on how to use technology

proved to be a major challenge in students' educational journey. Beyond basic skills, navigating learning systems and online classroom resources – which could look different for each teacher – was overwhelming for many families, particularly where literacy and language barriers existed.

Through a grant with the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, the education foundation began serving as a bridge between schools and families in November 2020, hiring five eLearning coaches to serve families of 300 K-5 students. Upon referral for the program by schools, an eLearning coach would make a home visit with the family to assess technology access, provide necessary technological equipment and setup, and offer instruction about eLearning applications and basic computer operations. Each coach continues to follow up with their assigned families.

Additional community partners are seeing the long-term value in this investment, and the Hillsborough Education Foundation has committed to continuing the program through the 2021-22 school year. One key measure of their impact is ongoing assessment of growth in parent engagement related to their child's learning.

[\(#144 – Kim Jowell, Hillsborough Education Foundation\)](#)

## 2 Just-in-Time Tech Support is Key

**New expectations of tech savviness can be met when communities address needs for responsive support.**



Frustration ruled the day for families and teachers alike when learning was 100% virtual. Everyone's figurative bandwidth was stretched, sometimes with complete system failure and other times with solvable issues that could seem insurmountable to those experiencing them. As students moved to hybrid or fully in-person learning, new expectations that families could navigate learning platforms and teachers could incorporate technology seamlessly in their classrooms appear here to stay.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools approached this challenge by establishing the Distance Learning Helpline for students and families to access information and help in real time using a "swarm" approach. It was designed to be the first line of support for families unfamiliar with technology and/or with language barriers to understand how to navigate the digital world of education, access the various digital platforms and troubleshoot basic challenges. By mid-March 2021, the helpline had assisted with 56,000+ calls and plans are underway to continue the service next school year.

[\(#114 – Dr. Sylvia Diaz, Miami-Dade County Public Schools\)](#)

Other school districts asked community partners to help. Duval County Schools Family and Community Engagement Office partnered with St. Stephen Church to provide a Zoom platform where families could get help and encouragement with homework and the technology involved. The effort was a natural extension of the district's

Parent Academy, aligning with their mission to empower parents to become more confident in their ability to assist their child in standard-based tasks and understand grade-level requirements better.

[\(#166 – Dana Kriznar, Duval County Public Schools\)](#)

Martin County's effort focused on supporting students as they moved to and from in-person learning to the district's synchronous hybrid model, making the process as seamless as possible for vulnerable families. They provided laptop computers, 400 hot spots, video tutorials in multiple languages and home visits in their relatively small community. Lessons learned could prove valuable for any district choosing to continue providing hybrid classrooms for students who may temporarily or permanently be unable to participate in in-person learning.

[\(#34 – Mary White, Martin County Public Schools\)](#)

For teachers, the tech needs and opportunities were coming at them hard and fast. There was no time for traditional training or webinars. Many districts and schools offered tech assistance on an as-needed-basis with designated coaches, while others established weekly help sessions led by tech-savvy teachers willing to share their knowledge. One example: Tech Tuesdays at MILA Elementary School in Brevard. Through a voluntary Zoom meeting, teachers could ask for help, pose questions, offer solutions and troubleshoot tech problems in a solution-oriented roundtable. As teachers became more comfortable with technology, Tech Tuesdays also served as a forum to introduce teaching apps or programs that could be beneficial to integrate into their classrooms.

[\(#27 – Amy Bolding, MILA Elementary School, Brevard\)](#)

### 3 There's Value in Meeting Families Where They Are

**Many schools redoubled efforts to serve families and, in doing so, deepened their understanding of existing challenges.**



Several schools and community partners acknowledged the heightened stress level many families were facing, understanding that students cannot learn when their basic needs aren't met.

The Citrus County Education Foundation emerged during the pandemic as a lifeline to many families in their community. They collaborated with their district and recruited 100 friends of the foundation to create a Citrus Cares community effort, visiting with families individually to overcome barriers to learning. By knocking on doors and delivering essentials, they built relationships with families who had never needed assistance before and didn't know how to get help. They established trusted communication and were able to give feedback to district leaders about challenges and disconnects between schools and families.

One lesson learned by the foundation was the value of home visits for one of their core constituencies. For the Class of 2020, board members had front-yard visits with graduating top scholars to congratulate them on their success. They continued this practice even as in-person gatherings resumed for the Class of 2021 because it led to a much deeper appreciation of the day-to-day realities of students and their families by foundation leaders.

[\(#105 – Shaunda Burdette – Citrus County Education Foundation\)](#)

For many school districts, including Collier County Public Schools, kindergarten registration meant showing up at a certain place and time with required documents in hand. When families didn't navigate the process that led to on-time registration, kids ended up missing the first critical days of school. The district's student registration and technology departments collaborated to develop a streamlined process that allows parents to register from the comfort of their own home and on their own timeframe. Required documents are uploaded via computer or mobile device. The new process has been well received and has led to more accurate enrollment numbers. District leaders continue to tweak the system so it can be used for all student registrations.

[\(#161 – John Antonacci, Collier County Public Schools\)](#)

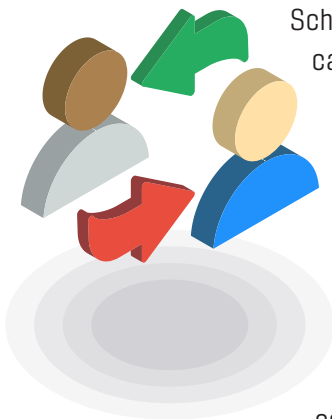
In terms of parent communication, several innovators shared their strategies for multi-channel, multi-language outreach. Google Translate allowed some to avoid the time and expense of translators with closed-caption messages in different languages added to YouTube videos.

With a Hispanic student population of over 35 percent, Manatee County recognized that effective bilingual outreach was paramount to reopening schools. In collaboration with the Manatee Community Foundation's grant program, the district established a "Spanish hotline" that addressed district changes concerning school protocols. The effort leveraged social media presence, radio and print messages and the new helpline. The district also created an interactive multi-language Facebook page as a centralized location for families to access state, community, agency, faith-based and neighborhood resources.

[\(#16 – Cynthia Saunders, School District of Manatee County\)](#)

## 4 New Outreach Strategies Can Result in Deeper Engagement

**As we connected with families in digital venues, participation grew.**



Schools and program leaders lament that they can't get parents to show up. Parents and caregivers are using their voices, saying they need more flexibility to meet at the time and on the turf that works for them.

A 30-year veteran first-grade teacher shared that through monthly Zoom parent nights she developed stronger family connections that resulted in the school and families becoming a more cohesive learning community. She reflected that earlier in her career she made home visits at the beginning of the school year and that some families found the encounters awkward or were not eager to have her in their home. Now, it has become a habit for families to gather around their kitchen tables for regular Zoom conversations with her. People have become increasingly comfortable with the practice and

she feels she has gotten to know her students and their families much better, meeting pets and siblings along the way. Several education innovators shared similar experiences, commenting that they plan to continue the practice post-pandemic. One comment: It's a time-saver for all and certainly more family-friendly than expecting families to drive across town and sit in the "little chairs"!

[\(#37 – Mindy Myers, Shadowland Elementary, Collier, and #33 – Arleen Valdes, Avant Garde Academy, Broward\)](#)

How to deliver uninterrupted Exceptional Student Education services was another formidable challenge in the early transition to virtual education. One specific practice discovered in the process that appears to have sticking power post-pandemic is virtual Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings. The time and effort involved in coordinating parents, teachers and multiple service providers for the mandated meetings previously held in-person is a major pain point for everyone involved. In an April 2021 roundtable hosted by the Clay Education Foundation, one teacher shared how their school had 100% parent participation in virtual IEP meetings this school year – a time-saving strategy applauded by the room!

ESE leaders in Collier, where the district has 1:1 device distribution for students, saw the disruption as an opportunity to re-imagine how they could serve families more effectively at every level. They built in WebEx video conference capacity in their Canvas learning system, inviting all service providers to engage students in small group or individual sessions through the platform, all linked to the general education teacher's Canvas page. Their guiding principle was to ensure that services were delivered according to the intent of the IEP in terms of frequency, duration, focus and monitoring – recognizing that how these services were delivered often had to be adjusted without a certified teacher or related service provider in the home.

[\(#162 – Emily Kafle, Collier County Public Schools\)](#)

Eliminating a physical location also made things surprisingly more “real” for students considering their options at School Choice and College Night fairs. No longer bound by capacity in a school gym or other venue or limited to brief conversations between students and school representatives at a booth, education innovators reported increased participation and more substantive interactions.

Duval County Public Schools reimagined their School Choice Expo and found the online format a more effective way to showcase the array of options available at 160 district and 40 charter schools. Each school was able to upload information, hold live chats, provide virtual tours of the school, share videos, and have veteran students available to chat with potential students and their families. Parents could peruse the choices from the convenience of their home to determine the best fit for their child. With more than 2,000 participants, this new virtual platform increased access, eliminated need for transportation to the event, solved parking issues and cost far less than hosting at a physical location.

[\(#167 – Dana Kriznar, Duval County Public Schools\)](#)

For parents and caregivers, knowing whom to contact and getting quick responses is another age-old challenge, one that was heightened by the uncertainty and general frustration surrounding the pandemic. One Miami-Dade school came up with a new approach to communication: a virtual “open door” policy via Zoom. The Zoom window is left open throughout the school day and monitored by office staff so parents can talk or chat in real time and get their questions answered by school administration.

[\(#145 – Courtney Collier, Gateway Environmental K-8 Learning Center, Miami-Dade\)](#)

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## 5 Transportation Doesn't Need to Drive Access

Going virtual with some programs opened opportunities for equitable access.



What becomes possible for students when they don't have to find a ride? What experiences can you offer when you don't have to pay for buses or consider travel time? What can you accomplish if you don't have to worry about the pizza and the parking?

One story shared: A visit to a local landmark as part of a Florida history unit is a rite of passage for students in one school district. But the reality is that getting there was a logistical and costly challenge for schools in rural parts of the community. Now all schools can opt to book their docent-led virtual tour and not miss out on the experience. The Foundation for Seminole County Public Schools came up with a way for 120 students to audition virtually for a coveted spot in their Arts Alive program that doesn't penalize

kids who can't get a ride and turned out to work better for judges.

[\(#164 – Missy Mercado, Foundation for Seminole County Public Schools.\)](#)

The South Florida Regional Science Fair competition has been a mainstay for 67 years with students designing, conducting and presenting their research in a competitive academic environment. Maintaining a semblance of normalcy by offering students a chance to participate in meaningful extracurricular activities was important to Miami-Dade leaders, so they went full STEAM ahead with a virtual expo and competition for 3,000 students. The format opened up the event for participation by new partners including Discovery Education, and the website for the redesigned event has had more than 5,000 views, extending the impact of the effort.

[\(#67 – Cristian Carranza, Miami-Dade County Public Schools\)](#)

Pre-COVID, Indian River's literacy educator traveled around the county in a "Moonshot Rocket" bus visiting schools, childcare facilities and preschools to provide enriching literacy experiences as well as social-emotional support through movement and song. As an alternative, the Learning Alliance created an engaging series of interactive story time videos for kids featuring puppets to provide a literacy-rich experience for children from birth to third grade. They "open-sourced" the resources for broader reach throughout the community, including faith-based partners and childcare providers, developing new relationships in the process.

[\(#159 – Marie O'Brien, Indian River County Schools\)](#)

Collier County leaders pointed out that many students thrive on competition and extracurricular challenges. Just like football or soccer stars can parlay a great performance on the field into scholarships and financial aid, academic competitions can prepare students for post-secondary experiences, provide recognition and monetary rewards. Determined to not have students miss out this year, leaders restructured three academic competitions to virtual formats. They are considering a hybrid format for the future, so participation isn't limited by transportation and location barriers.

[\(#163 – Elizabeth Alves, Collier County Public Schools\)](#)



## 6 Wellness and Relationships Are Key to Coping

**When students and teachers are stressed, everyone suffers. New support strategies can help.**



The pandemic threatened not only physical health but emotional well-being for everyone in our school communities.

The Education Foundation of Sarasota County has an emphasis on wellness and life readiness with the students they serve in their college and career counseling programs. With isolation, stress and anxiety rising for students and teachers alike, the foundation saw an opportunity to broaden their impact for the greater community. They developed a four-part series for teachers and other community leaders including Understanding and Managing Stress – key strategies in developing life readiness skills and negotiating the pandemic. The Foundation team also created and shared additional lessons on Problem-Solving at Home & School (gr. 3-8) and Self-Calming Strategies (gr. 6-12). To date, they've had more than 6,500 page views by area teachers.

[\(#140 – Jennifer Vigne, Education Foundation of Sarasota County\)](#)

Over the summer of 2020, Collier district leaders collaborated with their sheriff's office to provide check-ins and behavioral and mental health supports for identified students. With parent permission, deputies visited student homes to ensure welfare, maintain connections and relationships, and provide resources and referrals as needed. In several instances, they even picked up and delivered meals from the school district for families unable to get them due to a lack of transportation or work conflicts. Once school resumed in the fall, school leaders were able to quickly identify students who may need continued support. Those involved believe the systems and relationships developed will benefit students experiencing trauma from other scenarios in the future.

[\(#160 – Richard Duggan, Collier County Public Schools\)](#)

Take Stock in Children has a 25-year track record of life-changing impact, helping more than 36,000 Florida students escape the cycle of poverty with the guidance of a caring mentor and incentive of a college scholarship. With 8,500 middle and high school students currently in programs managed by education foundations and other local partners, the state office had to quickly update tools and protocols when on-campus sessions were halted. Mentoring sessions moved to virtual platforms while being monitored by local program staff to provide safe and secure experiences. Students also interacted with their mentors through the Take Stock App, a Facetime-like video call feature that enables mentors and mentees to connect through a monitored platform and use text chat features. The program also introduced a Script E-Signature platform, allowing parents and mentors to complete and sign needed paperwork online that programs may opt to continue for a more streamlined, efficient process.

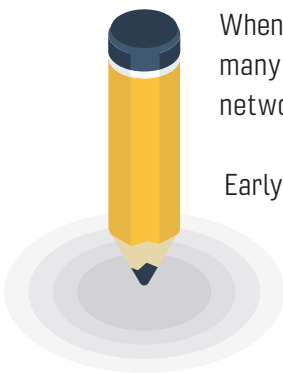
[\(#171 – Jillian Hassner, Take Stock in Children\)](#)

Mindfulness practices and quick individual student check-ins through a variety of platforms were also frequently mentioned by education innovators. We were grateful to hear many focused on the well-being of teachers as well as students by offering stress relievers including online yoga classes and teacher-to-teacher virtual conversations. The Jacksonville Public Education Foundation, Investing in Kids (INK!) in St. Johns County and the Clay County Education Foundation collaborated to host their second Northeast Florida Teacher of the Year Summit in February

2021. While last year's summit focused on trauma-informed classroom practices, this year's focus was all about uplifting and celebrating teachers who had all been traumatized to some extent by adapting instruction overnight to the new normal. After inspiration by kickoff speakers, teachers chose from an array of breakout sessions all focused on fun, wellness and enrichment. Organic gardening, Zumba, virtual escape rooms, self-care practices and an improv class were all options. The teacher chat box lit up with affirmations and encouragement for peers, and a Zoom Murder Mystery Party provided laughs, bonding and prizes.  
[\(#26 – Warren Buck, Jacksonville Public Education Fund\)](#)

## 7 Collaborate to Work Smarter, Not Harder

**Education innovators landed on new ways of doing things that lightened their load and deepened impact.**



When teachers, school leaders and program coordinators felt the weight of the world on their shoulders, many experienced cognitive fatigue, exhaustion, frustration and burnout. Others formed supportive networks and developed some exciting new collaborations in the process.

Early in the pandemic, Broward college and career counselors contacted their colleagues throughout Florida. How was everyone handling college nights now that in-person school visits were canceled? What about the kids looking forward to a spring bus tour of campus visits? How could we make sure 2020 and 2021 graduates wouldn't miss out on help in applying for federal financial aid through scheduled FAFSA nights?

Those conversations led to an amazing collaboration between five Florida districts that together hosted a three-week "All in On HBCUs" event that became a game-changer for both the school counselors and the families involved. The January 2021 Zoom event kicked off with talks by current and former students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), then two weeks of evening virtual campus visits and Q & A sessions, followed by college application help and an online FAFSA night with more than 500 participants. The school districts involved divided up the workload in arranging speakers, handling technology, preparing sessions and answering questions in the chat rooms. Each district promoted the event as if it were their own and received reports on participating students for individual follow-up. Besides dividing and conquering the workload, organizers saw many benefits to the new format, including greater parent participation and much lower costs. They also discovered that students who might not have raised their hand at an in-person event were willing to ask difficult questions in chat rooms. Organizers are already planning on expanding the event next year with participation by more districts and are using the model for other initiatives.

[\(#17 – Dr. Carol Lopez, Broward County Public Schools\)](#)

Several local education foundations also delivered their programs through some collaborative partnerships this year. The Education Fund of Miami-Dade provided healthy produce grown in their 25 school-based "food forests" through new partnerships including non-profit food trucks and produce "grab bags" for neighborhood refrigerator programs when schools were closed. The Brevard Schools Foundation's Supply Zone for Teachers program serves

30 of their district's highest poverty schools as well as students-in-transition, providing more than \$1.5 million in school supplies and hygiene items each year through a store where teachers typically "shop" for their students in need. Closed to in-person visits, they provided pre-packaged kits of the most frequently requested items at drive-through events and countywide Farm Share food distribution sites.

[\(#168 – Janice Kershaw, Brevard Schools Foundation\)](#)

Teachers and school leaders also looked outward to achieve their goals through new collaborations. Collier's Health and Physical Education Coordinator worked with their county parks and recreation department to help kids continue working on fitness goals and families burn off some pandemic stress. Together, they marked running/walking courses and developed fitness activities using available outdoor equipment at nine county parks. Printable guides, participation logs and a "finish line" gift bag with a T-shirt and medal encouraged families to de-stress and move together.

[\(#156 – Tracy Bowen, Collier County Public Schools\)](#)

## 8 It's Time to Open the Door Wide for Teacher Learning



**Innovations in teacher professional development emerged that are leading to permanent change.**

From large conferences to small professional learning communities, everything changed, including the language involved when talking about teacher development options.

Pasco County School District is charged with delivering quality professional learning experiences for 5,000 teachers and 350 administrators who all were working remotely and providing instruction virtually. As their Leading and Learning Department shifted away from the traditional day-long conferences to a virtual platform with multiple choices of shorter sessions, they were able to quickly meet the needs of participants and address topics of immediate concern. Participation changed from typical conference attendance of 400-500 to more than 9,500 unique sessions. District leaders have decided to continue with virtual summer professional learning events due to positive teacher feedback and increased overall participation.

[\(#24 – Lea Mitchell, Pasco County Schools\)](#)

Education innovators discussed the pros and cons of virtual synchronous and asynchronous teacher professional development. The interactive nature of live sessions is always a plus, but with teachers strapped for time, the value of on-demand sessions is clear.

As we return to an ability to host more face-to-face sessions, it also seems clear that teacher expectations will have changed in terms of online versus in-person. The option for hybrid or completely online training can mean avoiding an hour drive to the central office, but it can also make it harder to build relationships with colleagues and have "hallway conversations" that add value for participants. Some leaders are talking about shifting to a mixture of in-person, virtual and hybrid sessions, giving teachers more voice and choice in their professional development options. There's a growing understanding that proximity and the ability to travel need not limit teacher access to getting the professional development they need when they need it.

One really exciting new professional development opportunity we learned about is both hands-on and virtual – Florida’s first “Virtual CS Fest.” Computer science teachers will build and code robots, fly drones and compete in eSports – all from the comfort of their home, with materials shipped to them in advance. Besides equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to expand opportunities for students in this fast-growing field, participants will build a network of computer science teachers statewide.

[\(#172 – Kathleen Schofield and Lisa Milenkovic, Northeast Florida Regional STEM2 Hub\)](#)

The bottom line: The sky’s the limit for teacher professional development, and traditional “sit and get” style sessions can be left in the pre-pandemic era. This five-minute video provides great insights from 20 Florida district leaders on their new thinking and approaches to teacher professional development.

[\(#35 – Kelly Zunkiewicz, Impact Florida\)](#)

## 9 You Can Engage Community More Effectively



**Community volunteers not being allowed on campus actually made it easier for working professionals to say “yes” to a digital visit.**

A Clay County parent who is also a high school guidance counselor knew her child’s elementary class across town was doing a life cycle unit. She had a great real-time example to share – chicks emerging from eggs. In a pre-COVID world, she might have requested time off from her own school duties to bring the eggs to her daughter’s class. Instead, she arranged to Zoom in for a quick sharing session, involving one of her students in the process and giving him a chance to shine.

In a nearby classroom, the subject of intellectual property came up in a discussion. Students posed great questions beyond the teacher’s scope of knowledge. He made a call to a community member who Zoomed in the next day for a Q & A session with students, sharing more about his profession in the process. With the time commitment and hassle-factor minimized, it was an easy “yes” for the attorney.

Career Days and even student internships were effectively brought online throughout the state. The Education Foundation of Osceola County took their long-standing Career Pipeline program online with students visiting job sites virtually and guest speakers visiting with students via Zoom. They expanded their reach to expose more students from elementary through high school to in-demand careers in the health and construction industries.

[\(#173 – Samantha Giel, Education Foundation of Osceola County\)](#)

Districtwide task forces can also engage busy professionals more efficiently and effectively. Collier leaders shared the example of their Student Mental Health Task Force, a forum for 40 community members to contribute to more effective and seamless help for students in this crucial area. They noticed a busy healthcare provider participated in more meetings when they were held virtually. From the professional’s perspective, blocking one hour out of a day’s schedule to engage on the important topic was far easier than the two-plus hours generally involved when travel, parking and pre/post meeting conversations are factored in.



There is great potential to open up new meaningful community engagement opportunities for our students when we tighten up the time commitments involved. We can eliminate geographic barriers in the process, opening up a much larger sense of community to expand opportunities for students.

## 10 Schools Are the Heartbeat of Every Community

**More than any other entity, schools are the heart of our neighborhoods, communities and state.**



It was schools that became lifelines of information for families when the world turned upside down in March 2020. Schools continued to serve as trusted allies when families were most vulnerable and confused about where to turn for help. And even as some districts opened the 2020-21 school year 100% virtually due to continued high transmission rates, schools were still a physical touchstone for families. Drive-through supply pickup events also served as contactless pep rallies for the start of an unprecedented school year.

The perseverance of schools in ensuring continuous learning and support for 2.8 million Florida K-12 students while reinventing and adapting virtually every aspect of their work did not go unnoticed by parents, employers and community leaders. “Contact tracing” became a daily top duty for school administrators, bus drivers brought materials to at-home learners and thousands of teachers adapted their instruction strategies overnight. When it came time for traditional recognition programs for teachers and support staff, some local education foundations did their own pandemic pivots. The Manatee Education Foundation decided to forgo their traditional Teacher of the Year gala in lieu of a Champions of Education event honoring all 6,000 district employees with onsite school celebrations for their courageous work through the crisis.

Champions for Learning – the education foundation for Collier County – reconfigured their 31st Annual Golden Apple Teacher Recognition Program to look at how teaching and learning has adapted and continued in this unusual school year. Rather than their traditional red-carpet event, they invested in a three-month community campaign with the theme of “Educators are the heartbeat of every community.” The education foundation engaged their local NBC TV affiliate to produce a Golden Apple Celebration that wove together the story of what it took for Collier County Public Schools to be up and running in August 2020.

The broadcast documented and celebrated the breadth of teacher collaboration, district leadership and creative solutions that allowed their schools and entire community to move forward together.

[\(#169 – Amy Snyder, Champions for Learning\)](#)

### **Our Pandemic Opportunity: Make Small Things Stick While Thinking Big.**

Two of the biggest things confirmed during the pandemic are that most students do best with in-person learning and families rely on schools for so much more than classroom instruction.

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Another observation is that the experiences everyone in our school communities had during the pandemic may change the expectations they bring with them to the 2021-22 school year. We live in an on-demand culture where immediacy is a growing expectation. Students and teachers alike may have enjoyed a greater sense of agency and choice during the pandemic.

We believe that as we were forced to dismantle virtually everything in K-12 education we may have landed on some alternative ways of getting things done that work. We suggest communities use this report as a starting point for local conversations with all education stakeholders before the 2021-22 school year. We'd love to know what resonates in your context. We know we've just touched the surface of what's been discovered and invite you to share the discoveries that have emerged in your community. ([marychance@cfef.net](mailto:marychance@cfef.net))

We also recognize that what we've captured through our process are largely strategies and tactics as opposed to more systemwide changes.

We believe there is great internal wisdom in our current Florida education community – as evidenced by what we learned in this process – but we know there are national thinktank organizations that can push our thinking further. So we see this as a time to be thoughtful about making some of these smaller changes stick while at the same time not letting this moment pass without thinking big about deeper reinvention of our schools.

With the infusion of \$7 billion in federal U.S. Department of Education American Rescue Plan funds designated for Florida schools arriving in the coming months, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform an education system that was built for the 19th century.

The model of flipped classrooms – where students are introduced to content via technology as their homework and use class time for practice and discussion – is possible with deeper investments in technology. Creating more opportunities for students to be engaged in community and building more learner-center models seems possible. Maybe it's time to reinvent the high school experience in a way that works better for more kids. We can embrace the idea of schools as the heartbeat of communities by investing in deeper wraparound services for families.

Our organization has been fortunate to interact with some national leaders who have helped us think bigger about efforts to innovate learning. We encourage you to connect with these individuals and organizations to help your community consider possibilities for transformational change:

**Tom Vander Ark**, CEO, [Getting Smart](#)

**Michael Petrilli**, President, [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#)

**Kelly Young**, President, [Education Reimagined](#)

**Hedy Chang**, Executive Director and President, [Attendance Works](#)

**Shital Shah**, Manager, Philanthropic Engagement and Partnerships, [American Federation of Teachers](#)

**Jean Claude Brizard**, President and CEO, [Digital Promise](#)

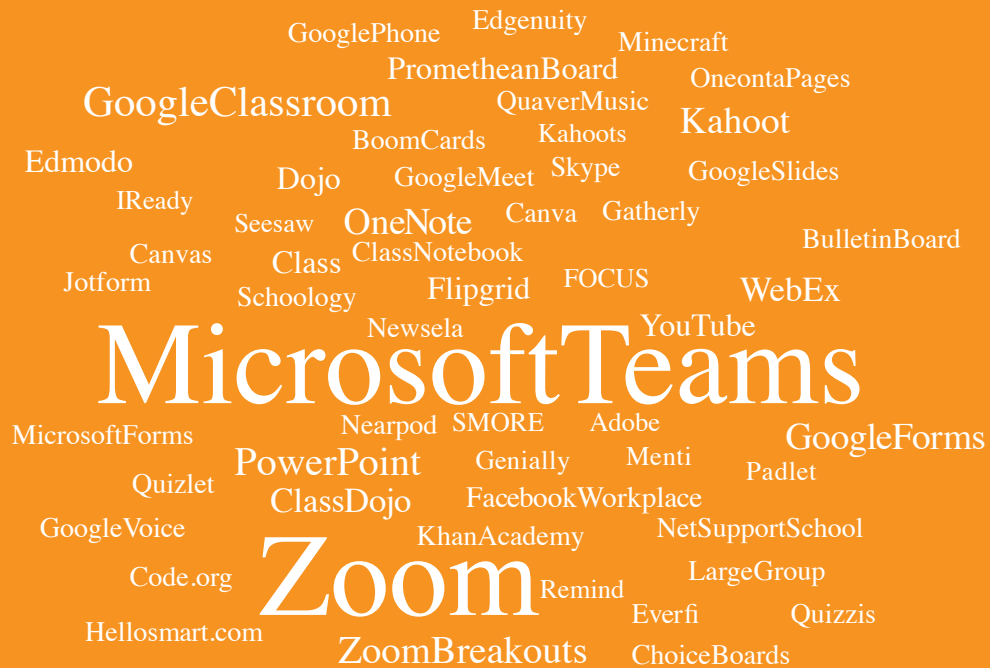
**Bethany Little**, Principal, [Education Counsel](#)

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We leave you with the analogy of our Florida education community as a rubber band. We've been stretched to the point of nearly snapping over the past 16 months. We've made it through, thanks to the heroics, creativity and tenacity of everyone involved.

The question before us is this: Will we just snap back to our original shape and function? Or are we now flexible enough to be reshaped?

This Word Cloud represents the frequency various apps and platforms were mentioned by education innovators.



## Partners:

- [Florida Philanthropic Network](#)
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- [Florida PTA](#)
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