

Miami Herald

OP-ED

A decade of inclusive education in Miami: What we've learned and what comes next | Opinion

Creating opportunities for children with disabilities requires meeting them where they are. | Opinion

By **Virginia Jacko**

September 26, 2026 5:00 AM



The Miami skyline from the Rickenbacker Causeway. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

When we founded the Miami Lighthouse Academy 10 years ago, we began with a belief: blind or visually impaired children deserve the same opportunities to grow, succeed and learn as their sighted peers.

In partnership with Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Early Steps and the Early Learning Coalition, we provide inclusive early learning (for children ages 1 through 4), and specialized elementary education through fourth grade.

A decade later, our experience reinforces a key lesson: creating opportunities for children with disabilities requires meeting them where they are, providing specialized tools and maintaining high expectations.

We've found value in inclusion for younger learners, while our elementary program demonstrates how specialized instruction offers students the tools they need to succeed and navigate the world independently.

Inclusion must be intentional. Children with and without visual impairments don't simply share a classroom; they're given different ways to access the same learning opportunities. In a print- and braille-rich environment, our students learn through the evidence-based HighScope Curriculum, with lessons and materials adapted so they can participate in their own way.

Through an eight-year research collaboration with the University of Miami, Pre-K teacher-child interactions met or exceeded national averages across emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support. Preschoolers demonstrated significant gains in social-emotional development, physical health, language and literacy, mathematics and social studies.

Teachers also observed compassion, patience, and understanding between students with and without visual impairments, including children developing their own ways of supporting their classmates.

Starting early

For blind or visually impaired children, the earliest years of education shape far more than academic readiness. Learning braille, orientation and mobility skills, and adapted technology can build a foundation for independence throughout school, into employment and adult life.

Children also need to move independently, communicate their needs, build peer relationships and complete everyday tasks. In our research, parents reported increases in their children's communication and independence, including their ability to express emotions and complete tasks like feeding and dressing themselves.

The earlier we give children the tools to understand and navigate the world, the more opportunity they'll have.

Too often, a diagnosis leads to assumptions, but blindness or visual impairment does not dictate a child's potential. It may change the tools they need to succeed. Our role is not to set limits, but to give children the resources and confidence to reach their potential.

Our elementary classes build academic and independence skills with a 5:1 student-to-teacher ratio and Florida-licensed teachers at every grade level. Students receive individualized instruction while building social-emotional skills that support academic progress and successful transition to community schools.

Families of children who are blind or visually impaired still face barriers to appropriate education, from funding specialized resources to accessing programs with licensed educators and adaptive technology.

It's not simply about where a child can attend school, but whether it has the expertise, resources and commitment to help them succeed.

Neither schools nor families can do it alone. Educators, healthcare providers, community organizations and policymakers must work together to provide services and support.

Next decade

We've learned there is no single formula for educating a child. Inclusion is powerful. Specialized instruction is essential. Early intervention can change a child's trajectory. Children deserve an education that meets their needs without limiting their potential.

When we opened Miami Lighthouse Academy 10 years ago, we aimed to show what happens when blind or visually impaired children have the tools and opportunities to reach their potential. Now, we're focused on creating a future where those opportunities are not exceptional.

This next decade, we'll work to extend opportunities to more families by expanding early identification efforts, widening access to specialized instruction and therapeutic services and investing in educators, tools and partnerships that make meaningful access possible.

Virginia Jacko is the president and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, where she has led the organization's expansion of education, rehabilitation and vision services for children and adults who are blind or visually impaired.

To listen to this article, visit <https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article317383648.html> and click the "Listen to this article" link under the photo.