

# Elevate Miami: Rites of Passage



## THE ENTRY POINT

Situated within a broad effort to elevate a city out of poverty, the City of Miami and the Miami–Dade County Public Schools partnered to launch the Rites of Passage Initiative, which uses technology as a vehicle for growth at every life stage.

## THE CHALLENGE

How can Elevate Miami’s Rites of Passage Initiative be sustained beyond the tenures of the current mayor, Manny Diaz, and superintendent, Rudy Crew, who collaborated to create the program? What values and outcomes need to be articulated to ensure a successful leadership transition?

## THE PARTNERS

Miami–Dade County Public Schools

City of Miami

Per Scholas

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Miami Dade College

Business partners

- Microsoft
- Intel
- Comcast
- AT&T

Senior Centers

- Gesu Senior Center
- Jack Orr Senior Center
- Sisters and Brothers Forever

Community-based nonprofit organizations

## The Story

### A Cradle-to-Grave Bridge over the Digital Divide

In 2005, Miami’s mayor, Manny Diaz, and the new superintendent of Miami–Dade County Public Schools (M–DCPS), Rudy F. Crew, announced the Education Compact, a commitment to join forces to ensure that all students graduate ready for college or work. The Education Compact recognized the central role that education would play in the health of Miami – one of the nation’s poorest cities – and the enormous commitment of resources that a successful education system would require.

One innovative point of collaboration has been the Rites of Passage Initiative, linking students, schools, and families with the city's digital inclusion program. A "cradle to grave" approach, Rites of Passage aims to establish public and private partnerships to facilitate technology literacy and access at every life stage and to prepare all of Miami's residents for leadership in the global economy.

Elevate Miami is the City of Miami's response to the growing digital divide and the obstacles that the divide poses to lifting the city out of poverty. Elevate Miami provides comprehensive training on fundamentals of computer and Internet use and on how to access health, financial, educational, and other resources through technology. The program also provides affordable hardware, software and Internet packages, and technology financing.

In 2004, the City of Miami launched "eParks," free computer labs located in neighborhood parks, and "eSeniors," labs located in senior centers. The eParks provide free, reliable computer and Internet access; training in basic technological skills; and trainings tailored to parents of young children, adults seeking jobs, young people, and seniors. As of 2008, forty-three eParks with 239 computers serve Miami residents.

The Rites of Passage Initiative builds on the successes of Elevate Miami and the eParks by helping students acquire technical skills and competencies that will allow them to integrate the use of technology at every point in life. The centerpiece of Rites of Passage is the middle school program, which provides a free home computer to sixth-grade students who successfully complete a life-skills course centered on technology and maintain their grades and attendance.

Mayor Diaz made a commitment to find funding to provide computer and Internet access in school for sixth-graders across the system. The city, the school district, and other partners are seeking a total of \$2.5 million in funding to support the middle school Rites of Passage. Funding secured so far comes from the Knight Foundation (\$250,000), matching funds from the City of Miami (\$200,000), and a Microsoft Unlimited Potential Grant (\$600,000).

Middle school teachers developed a curriculum to teach computer literacy, Internet safety and resources, careers and financial literacy, health care, and life skills. Upon completing the curriculum and assembling a digital portfolio, students who maintain satisfactory grades and attendance will receive computers for home use. To stress the importance of parental involvement and buy-in at critical stages in a student's life, a value important to the mayor and the superintendent, the program includes a required parent-workshop program.

For high school students, the Rites of Passage program focuses on ensuring internship opportunities and career paths for students. The high school Rites of Passage build on the district's secondary school reforms, which emphasize career strands and internship opportunities. High school students are recruited to the eParks to assist users. Those who complete community service at the park may subsequently be hired for a paid internship at the park, and may eventually be offered employment as Elevate Miami technology coaches.

The school district also has various departments that work together to coordinate the internship opportunities and the secondary reform efforts and work with community and business

partners to tap into opportunities linked to students' career pathways. The district has developed an online forum where employers communicate internship opportunities and are then connected with schools in the same area or working in the same field. The City of Miami is one of these partners and will be providing opportunities for internships throughout city departments. The mayor is also committed to recruiting business partners to provide schools with internships and executive mentorship programs.

Parents are crucial targets of the Rites of Passage Initiative, as well. Through the Education Compact, the city and the district have developed a "branch" of M-DCPS's Parent Academy program for parents of children under age five to prepare children and parents for "school readiness" from the ages of infancy to the entrance of school. Parents are encouraged to use the computer labs, which have individuals trained to help them use district online resources, which are part of the Middle School Rites of Passage. M-DCPS's Web portal allows parents to access their child's grades, attendance, and textbooks; to communicate with teachers; to keep informed of school events; and to access homework assistance and other online resources.

### Senior Centers

Consistent with the goal of bridging the digital divide across generations, local senior centers have similarly become hubs of learning through Elevate Miami. Efforts to promote computer literacy among seniors have been very successful. To meet the demands of seniors at one particular center, the number of computers grew from four to twenty. Supported by an instructor, seniors utilize the Internet in many ways, such as corresponding with grandchildren, pre-arranging their funeral plans, and accessing newspapers from their home countries. For many of the participants, access to the world of technology is an answer to boredom and loneliness.

Elevate Miami works with Gesu Senior Center, Jack Orr Senior Center, and Sisters and Brothers Forever. AT&T provides Internet access in each of the eSenior Centers.

### Other Partnerships

Two business partners, Microsoft and Comcast, were partners in the development of the ePark labs from the beginning. They provided free Internet access and software licenses. Through their partnership within the eParks initiative, they saw the value of including programming and community outreach. These partners were part of the discussion in the development of the Elevate Miami Cradle to Grave model.

Per Scholas, a New York and Miami-based nonprofit organization, helps the initiative purchase large quantities of computers and software at an affordable cost. Per Scholas provides the initiative with high-quality, refurbished computers and installs all necessary software. Families participating in Elevate Miami can also access Per Scholas refurbishing services to purchase and upgrade their own computers.

Other partners include the Knight Foundation and Intel. The diverse partners are a testament to Elevate Miami's belief that moving this initiative forward requires collaboration among a broad range of sectors.

## Strengths, Challenges, and Scaling Up

Peter Korinis, the City of Miami's chief information officer, observes, "The work was not revolutionary, originally." While individual components of the work may not be innovative, Elevate Miami's cradle-to-grave model, ensuring that citizens have an entry point to technology at every stage in life, does represent a novel approach. The strength of the program lies in Elevate Miami's holistic model, which aims to build community-wide access to technology.

Through Elevate Miami's broad partnerships with businesses and nonprofit organizations, the initiative has been able to leverage resources and lay the groundwork for fiscal sustainability. In particular, these partnerships have enabled Elevate Miami to address the need to bridge the digital divide for its citizens and to provide citizens affordable avenues for accessing technology.

### Challenges

Sustainability presents a major challenge to Elevate Miami's Rites of Passage Initiative. Mayor Diaz and Superintendent Crew have successfully collaborated to design and initiate the program. Can Elevate Miami be sustained beyond the political life of the current mayor and superintendent? Elevate Miami's partner organizations agree that articulating foundational principles is a critical next step, so that leadership transitions will be informed by and consistent with those principles. While the program has had some success building partnerships with faith-based institutions and community-based organizations, Elevate Miami wants to expand ownership of the initiative beyond city, district, and business leadership to include more community-based organizations.

### Scale

The goal of Elevate Miami is to bring all Miami youth, seniors, and minorities up to digital speed so that Miami residents are able to compete in a global economy. The mayor's hope is to create a model that can be replicated in other U.S. cities. To some degree, because computers have not yet been distributed to the first cohort of sixth-graders, the question of what it means to take the work to scale may be premature. Elevate Miami's partnerships and focus on affordability will be key factors in successfully scaling up this initiative.

## Discussion Questions

- How can the initiative be sustained beyond Mayor Diaz's and Superintendent Crew's tenure?
- While Elevate Miami's broad range of partnerships is a strength, how are the variety of partners held accountable for the initiative's outcomes?
- Is there an alternative path for sixth-grade students who fail to reach their benchmarks and don't earn computers? What might an alternative path look like for these students? Is there a reentry point for Rites of Passage?

- In what ways can learning opportunities at school be linked to learning opportunities at the parks? What relationships need to be fostered between park personnel and school staff?
- How can this initiative be replicated in other cities with differing relationships between government and city schools?

## Site Team Members

Alberto Carvalho is associate superintendent at the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, Grants, Marketing, and Community Services at Miami–Dade County Public Schools. He is a national advocate on adequate education funding and has been instrumental in lobbying for the Reauthorization of Child Nutrition programs and securing physical education programs to combat childhood obesity. He is the recipient of the Cervantes Outstanding Education Award.

Lisa Martinez is director of Intergovernmental Affairs and Grants Administration at Miami–Dade County Public Schools. Previously, she served as the mayor’s senior advisor for education policy and youth initiatives and as the mayor’s director of policy and legislation, including the Education Compact and Elevate Miami. She taught elementary school for ten years and developed the Positive Partnerships Program, which targeted at-risk students.

Vivianne Bohorques is director of education and policy for the City of Miami Mayor’s Office. Previously, she served as the mayor’s aide for youth and family. As liaison to M–DCPS through the Education Compact, she took the lead on various initiatives including Elevate Miami, the Mayor’s Mentoring Initiative, Executive PASS Program, internships, and youth employment. She is a veteran mathematics teacher.

Peter Korinis is chief information officer for the City of Miami. Previously, he held positions as chief information officer of Fairfax County, Virginia, and senior manager with PricewaterhouseCoopers. He has more than twenty-four years of operational and management experience in information technology, including the comprehensive application of information technology solutions to business problems, particularly in government and K–12 education.

James Osteen is assistant director of the Information Technology Department for the City of Miami. He has over thirty years of information technology management experience, including software application development, strategic planning, change management, Internet and intranet development, and digital inclusion program planning and implementation.

## For More Information

- Elevate Miami: <[www.elevatemiami.org](http://www.elevatemiami.org)>
- Miami–Dade County Public Schools: <[www2.dadeschools.net/](http://www2.dadeschools.net/)>
- City of Miami, Office of the Mayor: <[www.ci.miami.fl.us/cms/mayor](http://www.ci.miami.fl.us/cms/mayor)>
- Miami–Dade County: <<http://miamidade.gov>>
- Per Scholas: <[www.perscholas.org](http://www.perscholas.org)>