Learning during the pandemic

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Dear Friend,

I hope you and your family have remained in good health throughout the pandemic. Community and connection have been essential ways of coping with challenges and uncertainties these days, for all of us.

Here at Perkins, we’re making every effort to stay connected to our students, families and friends, whether they are in Massachusetts or around the world.

You, too, are part of this larger Perkins family, and we are grateful for your ongoing support. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we are engaging with our students from afar and in new and creative ways, which you will read about in our cover story (pg. 1). Whether through Zoom class meetings, virtual check-ins with families in our Infant-Toddler Program or remote job search support for Career Launch participants, our dedicated faculty and staff have been committed to serving our community and making a positive impact. The work we do, enabled by your contributions, is important and necessary, no matter the unexpected circumstances we face.

When Perkins has confronted other crises in its nearly 200 years, the school has emerged stronger. We looked back in the Perkins Archives for this issue, sharing how Perkins responded to the 1960s rubella outbreak, which led to an increased number of deafblind students. You’ll read about how our Deafblind Program expanded both on campus and around the world through the Perkins International Program (pg. 4).

With your support, we will be able to meet any challenge and continue to provide essential services for people who are blind, deafblind or have multiple disabilities, all over the world.

Warmly,

Dave Power
President and CEO

Established in 1829 as the nation’s first school for the blind, Perkins today impacts the lives of children and young adults who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired with additional disabilities, as well as educators, professionals and caregivers. Our reach extends across the nation and throughout the world. The school is an accredited member of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. It is licensed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and by the Department of Early Education and Care. Perkins does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, national or ethnic origin, disability, age or sexual orientation.
Learning during the pandemic

How Perkins uses distance education and innovative strategies to support children and families

BY DAVID EISENBERG AND MAURA SULLIVAN HILL

When the Perkins campus closed for students and staff in March, few anticipated that campus would stay empty for the rest of the school year. But, thanks to your support, Perkins was ready: Our staff quickly adjusted to tackle the unique challenge of educating children with blindness or visual impairments from afar.

Teachers and students met for class on Zoom and organized academic assignments in Google Classroom. Virtual meetings replaced in-person interaction, and creative staff members hosted weekly dance parties on Zoom and even coordinated a virtual prom. Despite the challenges, our staff remained committed to the education and nurturing of all our students. Here’s a glimpse of Perkins community life during the pandemic.

CURBSIDE PICKUP KICKS OFF DISTANCE LEARNING

To do their best distance learning, students were in need of supplemental materials to complete their assignments, like iPads that read aloud and slant boards that position books for students to read. So Lower School and Secondary teachers and staff responded by gathering these materials for individual students — plus sanitizing and labeling them — and then offered curbside pickup for the items on campus, with everyone wearing precautionary gloves and masks. Perkins teachers and staff spent hours on campus assembling these packages, willing to go the extra mile to get important learning materials to families and children. They also hosted a second pickup in late April for additional materials and any items left behind in classrooms.
VIRTUAL VISITS SUPPORT INFANT-TODDLER PROGRAM FAMILIES

Even before the pandemic forced people to stay in their homes, Teri Turgeon, Director of Community Programs, was an advocate for conducting virtual home visits in the Infant-Toddler Program. Not only do these virtual visits allow more flexibility for families, but they also cut down on the time and costs of driving, allowing teachers to work with more children in need of support. Plus, they can be as effective as face-to-face interactions. So after launching a successful pilot program in June 2019, they were ready to bring that program to scale in March 2020 — right when children and families would need it most. And it worked. During the coronavirus shutdown, the 550 families served by the Infant-Toddler Program received two virtual visits per month, either by phone or video, and access to parent support groups online. The remote services were received so well by families, in fact, that Turgeon remains committed to exploring them as an option for families even after social distancing rules are lifted. “It’s an opportunity to support children and families and also think about how we are going to grow out of this,” she says. “Perkins has to continue being a leader.”

Families, teachers and students stayed connected over the video conferencing app Zoom.

PERKINS PSYCHOLOGISTS WERE THERE TO PROVIDE FAMILIES WITH EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

On top of the academic support Perkins has been providing families and children throughout the coronavirus crisis, we have also been there as an emotional resource. School psychologists sent home materials giving parents and caretakers tips for fostering emotional skill building in their children, whether they are verbal, nonverbal or have limited communication skills. They also sent home “social stories,” short guides for talking to children with different cognitive abilities about what was going on in language and terms they could understand — especially important because many students were confused about why they were being kept home and worried they were alone in having their routines upended. “We wanted parents to know, yes, we’re always here for your children, but we’re also here for you,” says Alessia Guerriero, a school psychologist in the Secondary Program.

DEAFBLIND PROGRAM TEACHERS HELP PARENTS BECOME AT-HOME EDUCATORS

Learning through touch is essential for students who are deafblind, so distance learning brought additional challenges for the Deafblind Program. Perkins teachers partnered with families to help them become educators themselves, and families rallied together to support each other in the new endeavor.

“There have been continual communications and support for the academics, but the social check-ins mean just as much to us right now,” says Heidi, whose daughter Hannah meets with fellow student Andrew every week over Zoom to do a craft, like creating a paper flag or spring rabbit. An occupational therapist plans the activity in advance to grow specific skills and promote communication between the two students. Andrew’s mother, Minnie, says, “Everyone has been so supportive and willing to think outside the box. Having Andrew actively participate with others through a screen and be happy about it is a true success. It makes me smile when he looks forward to his craft group.”

SOCIAL DISTANCING? MORE LIKE DISTANT SOCIALIZING!

Perkins also provided a digital space for teenagers with visual impairment to connect, whether they attend Perkins or other local schools. Courses previously offered in person were swapped for a series of virtual hangouts. Mondays were for skill building, with a focus on things that can be easily done at home, like cooking and folding laundry. Tuesdays were for trivia, game and movie nights. Fitness Warrior Wednesdays were all about wellbeing, as participants exercised and did yoga. And on Thursdays, kids were encouraged to call into Perkins’ radio station to host segments on sports, weather and other topics. “We have a strong community,” says Pat Ryan, who oversees Outreach courses. “We wanted to bring them together, to add some fun, inspiration and normalcy to their lives.”
LIBRARY LENDS MORE THAN BOOKS DURING CRISIS

On the last day before temporarily closing, the Perkins Library team leapt into action and shipped more than 4,000 braille books and digital cartridges to thousands of borrowers. And the team didn’t stop there. Led by Kim Charlson, Executive Director, library staff contacted every registered patron in Watertown and nearby Lexington to help connect them to resources and support services — in a few cases, they even helped arrange grocery deliveries.

Then, once the library officially closed, the staff turned to supporting Perkins teachers from home. Some teachers, unable to provide braille class materials to their students without help, emailed worksheets, quizzes, short stories and other class materials to the library team. The library staff converted the files with special software, embossed them into braille and mailed the finished products, along with teacher instructions, to the students’ homes, notifying teachers via email when the assignment had gone out.

PERKINS-TRAINED EDUCATORS THE WORLD OVER RISE TO THE OCCASION

All around the world, graduates of the Perkins International Educational Leadership Program responded to the pandemic as our teachers at home did: They found new ways of educating and empowering their students and communities.

Derya Uyar, from Turkey, created a short storybook about the importance of good hygiene to help parents conduct reading lessons at home and also show proper handwashing techniques.

In Egypt, Amal Ezzat put together a video demonstrating how parents can use tactile symbols to explain to their children who are deafblind what’s going on in the world and why their school is closed. And Jigna Joshi, of India, led a group of mothers to sew protective masks and distribute them throughout their communities.

These are just some of the stories from Perkins since the coronavirus pandemic began impacting everyone’s lives. And while each is different, they all show how, with your support, we are able to continue the work of helping children, families and whole communities who need us.

Profile: Meet Pete Woodward

The Rev. Brinton “Pete” W. Woodward, Jr. is both a parent of a Perkins graduate and a current member of the Perkins Corporation. He has been a generous supporter and active volunteer since his son, Brinton “Brint” W. Woodward III, started school at Perkins in 1987. In 2020, they donated a letter sent from Helen Keller to Brint’s great-grandmother to the Perkins Archives (pictured).

How did Brint benefit and grow during his years on campus?

We looked to Perkins to help with the skills Brint would need for independence in his life, like mobility, braille literacy and job training. Perkins fulfilled our hopes and expectations in those areas and created even more opportunities for him to learn and excel in extracurricular activities like theater, chorus, handbells and swimming, all while making friendships with students and faculty.

Today, Brint is happy, productively employed, active and skilled, thanks in good measure to all Perkins taught and provided him.

You support Perkins with a gift annually. Why have you also chosen to include Perkins as part of your estate planning?

Perkins has a special place in my heart because of all that it did for my son, who had enormous educational needs and challenges. My heart is grateful, and my philanthropy follows my heart.

Given your generous commitment to support Perkins for the long term, what are your hopes for Perkins’ future?

I hope that Perkins remains flexible in defining its mission as educational needs and the world changes, and that we remain on the forefront of technology for the visually impaired and the multi, differently abled.
Throughout history, Perkins emerges stronger from world-changing events

From the 1960s rubella outbreak to coronavirus, Perkins has history of tenacity in the face of crisis

BY DAVID EISENBERG
AND MAURA SULLIVAN HILL

In 1965, Edward J. Waterhouse, then-Director of Perkins, anticipated that the rubella outbreak that had been ravaging the country and world would put new stress on what little educational infrastructure existed for deafblind children at the time. Babies born to mothers who contracted rubella early in their pregnancy were often at risk of being both deaf and blind, and thousands of pregnant women were afflicted during the outbreak.

“There are signs of an approaching rubella wave,” Waterhouse wrote that year in The Lantern, the school’s former quarterly news publication. “Unfortunately, no country, including the United States, seems to be properly prepared to educate even moderate increases in the numbers of deafblind children.”

Looking back today, his prediction was accurate. But more importantly, his foresight also meant Perkins didn’t just respond to the crisis — it was prepared for it, even before it hit the East Coast.

With support from donors who understood the urgency of the situation at the time, the school quickly added classrooms, residences and evaluation suites so it would be ready for a growing population of children born deafblind, a common result of rubella. In 1969, a generous donor even helped the organization build out the Hilton Building, which to this day houses the Deafblind Program. And all that infrastructure was crucial, as Perkins’ deafblind population grew tenfold in the years after the outbreak.

Once the epidemic was over, the school didn’t de-emphasize the Deafblind Program, though. Perkins still leads the way in offering world-class, highly individualized learning for deafblind students and is renowned for teaching them everything from communication and play to academics and life skills. Plus, the Perkins International Program was established to bring lessons from our Deafblind Program to developing countries where rubella continued to impact children well into the 2000s.

But this is just one story. Since its inception in 1829, Perkins has responded to all manner of crises without wavering from our mission of uplifting children with visual impairments and additional disabilities. We enjoy that legacy in large part because of the community of supporters who has always believed in the potential of the children Perkins serves. And we are still living up to that legacy today in times of crisis because supporters like you keep that belief alive.

SUPPORT PERKINS KIDS WITH A MONTHLY GIFT

Your monthly gift will ensure we can continue to innovate and provide distance education for students with visual impairments so that every child can reach their potential, regardless of where they are learning. It is easy to join and will make a world of difference. Learn more at Perkins.org/Monthly
Bringing accessibility to the digital world

BY JOANN BECKER

One night, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, my phone buzzed with a notification from a popular app with news of restaurants still open for delivery in my area.

Perfect, I thought. The grocery delivery service I’d been using was backed up by demand. This would be a good way to get dinner, as my own shelves were nearly bare.

Just one problem: The app wasn’t accessible. As a blind person, I couldn’t discern which restaurants were listed on my phone screen, never mind place an order with one. Consequently, demand stripped me of my first option and my other option wasn’t really an option at all. Not for me, at least.

Unfortunately, for people with disabilities, this type of thing happens all the time.

Websites, apps and all other digital platforms are created disproportionately with only the needs of typically able-bodied users in mind. And the problem is everywhere. From health care to education, e-commerce to entertainment, there isn’t a single industry succeeding when it comes to creating digital platforms all people can use.

That’s why I’m so proud to work with Perkins Access. We walk organizations through the process of creating digital products that people with disabilities — people like me — can use by providing training and consultation. I’m proud because this work is necessary for creating an equal society in a digital world.

Think about it: People do everything online. They keep in touch with friends and family. They go to school. They navigate important information about their health care. They get to and from places using ride-sharing apps. Yet despite all this, so many common digital products simply aren’t accessible to people with disabilities. It doesn’t have to be this way.

And if you’re wondering why a school for the blind is so focused on helping organizations embrace digital accessibility, well, the answer is a simple one. Around here, we like to say Perkins prepares students for the world and the world for the students. Championing digital accessibility is one of the most important ways we live up to the latter part of that statement.

Looking ahead, there’s so much work to be done — the pandemic, which forced the world to operate remotely, online, has made that all too terrifyingly clear. Yet I know we can create a more accessible connected world, one in which disability isn’t a barrier to using digital platforms at work, in the home or anywhere else. We just can’t create it without your continued support. So together, let’s create that world.

JoAnn Becker is the Manager of Assistive Technology Training with Perkins Access. She has more than two decades of experience in the field and has trained hundreds of students, teachers and adults to use assistive technologies and devices. 
WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Your feedback as a supporter and friend of Perkins is deeply valued. Please take a short survey online at Perkins.org/2020Survey.