Issue: Miami-Dade Public Schools PE teacher Annie Perez was seeking something that would inspire and motivate students with disabilities. “Children with disabilities are often overlooked outside of the traditional school setting,” Perez said. “I wanted to find an activity that would build their confidence, improve socialization, and decrease stress levels, all while achieving health and fitness goals.” Ranging in age from 14 to 21, her students had very diverse intellectual, physical and social abilities. With 28 years of teaching and varsity coaching experience, she was well-prepared and eager to take on an unorthodox new challenge.

The Big Idea: The solution came out of the blue — quite literally. The “Anchors Away” program would take advantage of Miami’s abundant water-based activities — swimming, snorkeling, water safety, kayaking, sailing and fishing — to foster teamwork, responsibility and integration while helping students learn about marine life and the fragile environment. District Director for Physical Education and Health Jayne Greenberg, Ed.D., already had developed a successful district-wide “Learn to Swim” program, and was a skilled grant writer. She was confident of getting donations of sailboats, kayaks, safety gear and other needed equipment. Grants, community partnerships and fundraisers would defray transportation costs and help gain access to a variety of water sports.

Implementation: Students who hadn’t passed the mandatory swim test honed their skills in a four-week swimming program. About 30 swim-certified students, divided into groups of about 15, met at 8 a.m. on alternate Mondays, with signed permission slips in hand and bags packed with swimsuits, booties, water bottles, towels and sunscreen. They typically headed to Oleta River State Park, where they learned how to set up, use and maintain their water sports equipment and protect the natural resources of that particular location. Everyone participated in an environment of teamwork and cooperation. An enthusiastic team of coaches and instructors provided the optimal one-to-five ratio of staff to students.

Some “Anchors Away” students had never even seen the ocean or Biscayne Bay, and...
had no idea what they were getting into, but inevitably, the water worked its magic. “A non-verbal student with autism spent his first three years of high school on a double kayak, not paddling and rarely attempting physical movement,” Perez says. “With patience and diligence, during his fourth year, everything finally clicked and a spark of confidence appeared. Within months into the new school year, the student achieved skills necessary to operate a kayak on his own and spoke more than he had in years.”

**Takeaway:** Perez, a SHAPE America member, says that students with severe autism find calmness in water, and repetitive movements are often quelled and replaced with skill. “It also increases students’ ability to focus,” she says. “The amazing changes in their lives have made me a believer and even more committed to teaching students with disabilities through lifetime physical activities. The smiles on their faces and the happiness they experience are well worth the effort.”

**Results:** The team collects data showing measurable results that has helped ensure the continuation of outside funding for the program. The program has yielded “stellar” results, says Perez, creating both autonomy and lifetime skills, as well as producing many leaders who go on to mentor incoming students. The activities also create friendships between students of varying exceptionalities.

“I encourage students with intellectual disabilities to work with each other,” explained Perez. “I’ll pair up a student with Down syndrome with a student with autism. Each feels a heightened sense of responsibility and must communicate with his or her partner, learning to put aside differences to reach a common goal.” She adds that parents who were initially nervous about having their son or daughter on and in the water are reassured after seeing that their kids are in good hands and totally enthralled in their activities. “The students are so excited, they pack their bags the night before,” she says. “It’s the highlight of their week.”

**Project Team**

**Miami-Dade County Public Schools**

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**Learn to Swim Program**

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