

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS ON A DIGITAL PLATFORM

Mandy Perry, *Principal* | Pinellas Virtual School

**Dedicated to pairing digital learning with personalized attention, Pinellas Virtual School (PVS) is well versed in the advantages and challenges of online K-12 learning.** A partner of Florida Virtual School (FLVS®), PVS is dedicated to elevating the academic skills and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies of its students using an online platform. To achieve these goals, PVS has for the past several years partnered with ACT® Mawi Learning™ to offer students a suite of courses designed to enhance student success. As brick and mortar schools across the nation respond to COVID-19, educators are looking to individuals like PVS Principal Mandy Perry to help facilitate the transition to virtual learning.

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Founded in 1997 as the country's first statewide Internet-based public high school, FLVS provides student-centric solutions to blend digital learning with the tactile environment of the classroom. As one of seventy-two FLVS County Virtual Schools, PVS provides online education for a diverse population of learners, including college-level and homeschool students, children in military or overseas families, amateur athletes, homebound

youth, and many others. The school offers free enrollment for K-5 students, as well as part-time and full-time work for 6th-12th grade students. PVS courses can also help students meet Florida's Digital Learning Act, which requires students to complete an online course before graduating.

Before joining PVS in 2013, Mandy Perry served as a virtual instructor of World History and Law Studies for FLVS, later taking on the role of instructional leader. It was during this time that she was introduced to Mawi Asgedom, the celebrated author and founder of Mawi Learning. This meeting would not only have a profound impact on Perry, but also on the future of PVS and its student learners. As she explains, “Everybody has some sort of a story that they can tell and that they can relate to. [Mawi] has taken that idea and laid it out in these courses [so that] kids are able to...understand that they have a story. They have the ability to change that story, and they have that ability through their own mindsets and their own processes.”

Since implementing Mawi Learning's evidence-based curriculum, PVS has experienced significant academic success and an overall increase in students' growth mindset; completion rates have also increased dramatically, rising from approximately 40% of students in 2013 to 82% in 2020. As a result of Mawi Learning's dual emphasis on educational achievement and increased student well-being, the program has expanded from approximately 200 students to nearly 2,000 in the last seven years, which Perry says will only increase as times goes on.



Perry adds that this transition to research-based SEL curriculum required a cultural shift at PVS. “There wasn’t a lot of relationship building going on,” says Perry, speaking of when she joined the PVS team. “It was ‘Here’s the work that you have to turn in, if you turn it in great, if not we’ll just give you a zero and then we’ll call it a day once we give your grade.’” Perry adds that one of the assumptions about virtual learning is that the platform impedes genuine relationship building between students and educators. With help from Mawi Learning’s professional development training and support, her staff of 22 instructors can now attest that this stigma is both misplaced and outdated. “We’ve seen the mind shift and the culture shift that’s gone on within the school, and it’s exciting for everybody involved,” she says. “I think [the teachers] feel good about building those relationships with kids. I think it makes their jobs more rewarding than just sitting around grading papers.”

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As COVID-19 continues to shift the educational landscape, Perry and her team at PVS are more thankful than ever to have access to Mawi Learning’s SEL Toolkit, which encourages students to develop a stronger awareness of their strengths and opportunities for growth. Bolstered by years of academic research and proven results, SEL competencies have only grown in value as students grapple with the reality of the pandemic and who they are in the larger community. “I think that [Mawi Learning] teaches people to care about themselves in terms of self-care, but [it] also teaches us to care about other people in terms of how we interact with our world and our society and the people that live in it.”

This focus is particularly evident in PVS’s Leadership Skills Development course, which uses a service-learning component to encourage students to heighten their overall social awareness. “Not only does [the course] teach you a little bit about

yourself,” shares Perry, “but it also teaches you how to be an active participant within the community. To help others and to maybe help those other people write their story as well, and have a positive influence on that.” Other Mawi Learning courses available through PVS—Critical Thinking and Study Skills, Career Research and Decision Making, and Peer Counseling—have similarly enriched students’ time management and problem-solving skills.

Though many brick and mortar schools continue to assume that virtual learning inevitably leads to a disconnect between students and educators, Perry argues that the reality is just the opposite. Indeed, it is the anonymous nature of the online platform that encourages PVS students to engage more openly with their teachers. “We get a different perspective on students,” shares Perry. “Sometimes, kids...tell us things that they wouldn’t normally write in an assignment that they’re going to hand into the teacher...[The students] are more free to expose their vulnerable side. They give us some insight into things that are happening in their lives.”

While PVS has largely been able to continue providing a secure and reliable network for its students during the pandemic, Perry and her team recognize how radically the last few months may alter the larger educational climate. Based on her experience with Mawi Learning, Perry is hopeful that schools nationwide will change how they facilitate online learning to enhance SEL skills. She shares, “I think there are advantages to implementing this [curriculum] with fidelity [by] considering not just the academic piece but taking into account people’s socioeconomic statuses and [how] they can assist with that.”

Though it is uncertain what K-12 education will look like in the months and years to come, Perry is confident that providing more opportunities for learning—whether they be virtual, face-to-face, or a blend of the two—is essential to the future of K-12 schools. As Perry concludes, “It seems like we have that brick and mortar 1950 setting or we’ve come up with this new age setting of the virtual school and lost some of the in-between type stuff, where blended might be beneficial or technical programs that have dissipated over the years would be more important. I think the more options that are available to kids, the more successful they will be.”

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To learn more about Mawi Learning and other ACT Social Emotional Learning offerings and research, visit [act.org](https://act.org).