

REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY 2022-23

1 in 36 Beyond the Autism Numbers:
Your Impact on the Lives
in the Connections Community



CONNECTIONS
Supporting the Autism Community



Today in America, **1 in 36** children is being diagnosed with autism. That means that here in Palm Beach County more than **41,000** people are living with autism.

This unprecedented prevalence means that autism is now everyone's story. We all know – or soon will – someone with autism.

Here at Connections, we see that story unfolding daily as our neuro-diverse students and young adults with autism thrive under our care. We create hope for these individuals and their families, guiding children as they master academics that were once difficult for them, and teaching essential life skills that enable students to connect with their families and stay safe in their communities. This essential, life-changing work is only possible because of our supporters who understand this urgent need and have chosen to be part of the solution.

We're proud to update you on the progress being made at Connections and show you the lives you're impacting.

Quick Facts Autism Advocates Need to Know

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that can affect a person's social interactions, communication abilities, sensory system and behaviors. It's often referred to as a "spectrum" because of the diversity in how it presents in different people. Autism is a life-long condition, though its impacts can be reduced by specialized education and therapies.

- ▲ Autism is nearly 4 times more common in boys than girls.¹
- Autism touches all races, ethnicities and socioeconomic groups.¹
- Approximately 30% of the time, autism co-occurs with intellectual disability.²
- ◆ The earlier intervention begins, the more effective it is.¹
- ▲ Drowning is the No. 1 cause of death for children with autism. Children with autism are 160 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers.³
- 91% of autism drownings occur after the person has "wandered." 51% of caregivers of those with autism report that the person has wandered at least once.⁴
- 16% of children with autism have been kicked out of childcare or preschool before elementary school.⁵
- ◆ Some 5.4 million adults in America have autism.¹ The unemployment rate for adults with autism is double that of the general population.⁶

Despite the rapid rise in autism, new research gives cause for optimism. Autism biomarkers are being studied by the U.S. National Institutes of Health. New tablet-based tests that measure eye-tracking may allow earlier diagnosis of autism, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. And recent studies published in *Nature Neuroscience* have identified four neurotypes of autism and, with the help of machine learning, are identifying which therapies will be most effective for each type, speeding progress.

Sources:

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

² *Oxford Handbook of Autism and Co-Occurring Psychiatric Conditions*

³ Autism Society of Florida

⁴ Disability Scoop

⁵ *Exceptional Children Journal*

⁶ Autism Society

MESSAGE FROM LEADERSHIP



Each year, compiling our annual report allows us to reflect on our achievements realized for our students, adults and their families that have been made possible through your unwavering support. In the following pages, immerse yourself in stories of transformative victories, none of which would have been conceivable without your help.

The generosity of our donors and partners surpassed our expectations over the last school year, giving us the opportunity to develop new programs as well as enhance our current, impactful programs. We are proud of our accomplishments, confident in our strategy, and inspired by our extraordinary staff, students, adult clients and families. We thank you for being a part of our success.

This year was marked with many significant achievements. We have created partnerships with the community for vocational and sports opportunities, created volunteer relationships, enhanced and redesigned our high school transition program, and received grants that have allowed us to improve our facilities. The infusion of additional board members, bringing with them invaluable expertise and experience, will steer us toward a future rich with possibilities. We thank you for your ongoing participation.

Our donor support has allowed us to be a powerful, positive force in the autism community. Together, we are changing lives, attitudes and practices to create a world where we all belong. As we look to the future, we see Connections continuing to grow to provide the most comprehensive, meaningful services that prepare our students and young adults for success and inclusion in their communities. To our families, friends, individual donors, corporations, local businesses and agencies that have provided funding, thank you for your belief in our mission and in the possibilities for the deserving students and young adults who we so proudly serve.

As we venture into 2024, sustainability, innovation, and inclusivity will remain at the forefront of our mission as we move forward to serve our families and make decisions about our future facilities. We are excited about the journey ahead and are committed to advancing the mission and vision of Connections. Thank you for being our partner in fulfilling this important dream.

With Gratitude,

Debra A. Johnson, M.Ed
Principal/Executive Director

Sonia F. Kay, Ph.D. OTR/L
President, Board of Directors
Connections Education Center

Marc Edenzon
President, Board of Directors
Connections High School &
Vocational Center

GET TO KNOW CONNECTIONS

9

years of service with significant growth

132

students and adult clients today, opened with 22

3:1

or better student-to-staff ratio

92

full-time staff members, including:

- 17 certified teachers
- 5 speech therapists
- 5 board certified behavior analysts & 10 registered behavior technicians
- 2 occupational therapists
- 2 adaptive aquatics instructors
- 1 school nurse
- 3 nutritional experts including a professional chef with training for autism
- 26 bilingual teachers and staff members

94%

staff retention rate, creating consistency and comfort for our students and clients

Our Mission

To empower students with autism and related disabilities to learn academic, social, vocational and independent-living skills using evidence-based strategies and a family-centered approach.

Our Vision

Connections envisions a world where everyone is given the opportunity to achieve their full potential and where students with autism can access the specialized, caring instruction and therapies they need to become productive members of their families and community.



BEYOND THE NUMBERS – GET TO KNOW CONNECTIONS

Our highly qualified, experienced and caring team delivers top-quality education and therapies through three entities: Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches (our Title 1 charter school for students in preschool–8th grade), Connections High School & Vocational Center (our private high school) and the Connections Adult Program known as CAP (for adults with autism who have aged out of the school system yet still need support). We take a holistic approach to each student's growth and consider the entire family's input and well-being.



Back row: Debi Johnson, *Principal/Executive Director*, Jason Portman, *Director of Operations/CFO*, Front row: Pam Ludwick, *Director of High School & Vocational Center*, Melissa Carman, *Director of Connections Education Center*

WHO WE SERVE

- ◆ Our students and adult clients range on the autism spectrum and need moderate to high support.
- ◆ **85%** of our students live below the poverty line.
- ◆ **94%** come from minority families.
- ◆ Almost **50%** live in single-parent families or with grandparents.
- ◆ Our students come from Palm Beach County.
- ◆ Each family supports the school with **40** hours of volunteer work each year.

HOW WE SERVE

Connections Education Center

Meet Kindergartener Chamia-Marie. Before coming to Connections, she struggled to communicate, held to a rigid routine constructed in her mind, remained isolated and experienced 10 or more tantrums a day, making life very difficult for her and her family. But as she begins her second year at Connections, she's a fun-spirited girl who interacts with other students, feeds herself, expresses her wants and needs with a variety of nonverbal cues, and remains calm most of the time. She's now working on matching quantities to numbers and learning the sounds letters make. Her mom Milande says, "I love this school. She has done so well there."



Connections Education Center

- Opened in **2015**
- Serves 88 students ages **3-14** in preschool–8th Grade
- Currently, at max capacity with a waiting list
- **36,300** hours of reading instruction yearly
- **26,400** hours of math and science lessons yearly
- **310** parent/family consultations yearly
- **15** parents/staff trainings yearly

Our nonprofit, Title 1 charter school delivers high-quality academic instruction plus early intervention for young students with autism. Applying evidence-based teaching strategies and a personalized combination of therapies, the school helps students master the skills they need to become confident learners and engaged members of their families and communities. We leverage cutting-edge technology to enhance learning. For nonverbal students, for example, we equip them with assistive technology devices to support communication, socialization and academic mastery. We extend learning with extracurricular rotations through classes for art, healthy eating, fitness and aquatics, and we engage in community integration through field trips.

Each student's learning plan is detailed in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) developed by certified educators in collaboration with each student's family. Teachers communicate continuously with parents and caregivers to build consistency and success between home and school environments.

Highest-Rated Charter School for Autism in the Entire State!

In aggregate, student academic mastery is measured through a statewide standardized test called the Florida Standards Alternate Assessment (FSAA). Connections is the only charter school for students with autism in Florida to have achieved the "Commendable" rating on the FSAA!

Connections Wins Top Honors in Palm Beach Illustrated Magazine's 2023 Education Awards

We are honored to have received the "Institutional Excellence" award from *Palm Beach Illustrated* magazine in their 2023 Education Awards program. This prestigious award, chosen from hundreds of entries, is a testament to our dedication to providing high-quality education and service to students with autism.

PALM BEACH ILLUSTRATED'S

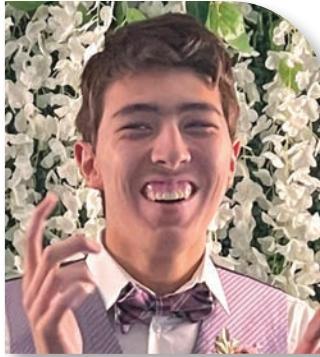
EDUCATION AWARDS

2023

HOW WE SERVE

Connections High School & Vocational Center

Meet AJ, a highly intelligent high schooler who struggled with communication, behavior regulation and emotional control before coming to Connections in elementary school. At his prior school, he slipped out of sight during recess and ran down Glades Road until stopped by a stranger. At



Connections, he is kept safe and given the environment and strategies he needs to learn. He has made a significant transformation. "AJ is having the best year that I've seen in 10+ years," says high school director Pam Ludwick. "He's building stronger relationships and communication skills daily."

Akemi, AJ's mom, adds: "As long as he's at Connections, I don't have to worry about anything because I know he's in great hands."

Our private, nonprofit high school weaves together functional academics and vocational training to help older students with autism transition into adulthood. In our apartment-style classroom and kitchen, students engage in hands-on learning to build independent-living skills. They also benefit from our full rotation of extracurricular classes as well as targeted therapies delivered throughout the school day based on each student's education plan, which is created by our certified educators collaborating with each student's family.



Connections High School & Vocational Center

- Opened in **2017**
- Serves **28** high school students ages **15-22**
- Currently, at max capacity with a waiting list
- **12,100** hours of reading instruction yearly
- **8,800** hours of math and science lessons yearly
- **10,080** hours of independent-living skills and vocational instruction yearly
- **104** parent/family consultations yearly
- **15** parents/staff trainings



HOW WE SERVE



Connections Adult Program (CAP)

Meet Mikayla, a kind girl who was diagnosed with autism early in life. After graduating from our high school, she still needed structure and specialized support during the day, and her options were limited. At CAP, she found an ideal place to stay safe and keep learning, and in the spring of 2023, she earned her culinary certificate! She's now working on additional employment skills and hopes to hold a job in the future. "Connections is a really special place," says Mikayla's mom Jen. "They really care about the kids."

CAP is an engaging program where young adults with autism can enjoy their days in a structured, supportive environment while they continue developing social skills, communication abilities, safety awareness, independent-living skills, vocational abilities and even leisure skills.

Connections Adult Program (CAP)

- Opened in **2020**
- Serves **14** adults ages **23+**
- Currently, at max capacity with a waiting list
- **13,440** hours of independent-living skills and vocational instruction yearly
- **12** CAP clients participate in community service for Peggy's Pantry at Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League and All-Tag Security

Holistic Approach to Development

Targeted Therapies

Based on each child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), our students benefit from high-quality therapies delivered throughout the school day in group settings and in one-on-one sessions. Students benefit from proven therapies – speech, occupational and behavioral – that help build communication abilities, social skills, behavior regulation, motor coordination and sensory regulation.

Health, Wellness & Aquatics Program

Our holistic program includes an innovative Health, Wellness & Aquatics Program to address unique challenges that students with autism experience. This program combats the No. 1 cause of death for children with autism, which is drowning, as well as lifestyle factors that have a significant impact on their quality of life.

This program starts with a **fitness program** where a personalized fitness plan is created for each student by a certified personal trainer who understands the motor challenges and aversion to structured exercise that many students with autism experience. All students in preschool through 8th grade have shown improvement in gross motor skills, and 84% of high schoolers have maintained or improved their weight while participating in the fitness program.



HOW WE SERVE

The **nutrition program** helps students who eat a limited number of foods – a common problem among those with autism – gain exposure to healthy foods and applies a systematic approach that has proven effective in helping students expand their diets to include fruits and vegetables. In 2023, our volunteers and students built a garden on-site that older students maintain. The harvest is shared among classes for learning and has piqued students' interest in trying healthy foods that may be new to them.

Our **aquatics program** is designed to teach water safety to combat the high rate of drowning among children with autism who are 160 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers. Our aquatics program includes weekly, one-on-one swim lessons designed specifically for students with autism, who usually acquire this skill differently than neurotypical peers. More than 70% of Connections' students have learned to swim 5-10 yards independently. Connections' adaptive aquatics program was shared as a model at the 30th Annual Statewide CARD Conference in 2023.



Meet high schooler Kylen. Before coming to Connections two years ago, he didn't know how to swim. "With the drownings in Florida and all the water and canals, it's frightening for us," says his grandmother and caregiver Zory. "But the Connections swim classes are helping him get more comfortable in the water and work on learning to swim," she adds.

Summer Program

While most children fall back academically a little over school breaks, students with autism often experience more serious regression. This regression can impact their ability to communicate, socialize, self-regulate and follow instructions, and that's on top of the academic regression that may occur. That's why Connections offers a Summer Camp for students who need routine, structure and guided social interactions. Our program meets the needs of students with autism in a safe, caring environment and helps them retain skills they've worked so hard to master during the school year.

Holistic Learning

- **11,600** hours of speech therapy yearly
- **5,020** hours of occupational therapy yearly
- **27,840** hours behavioral therapy yearly
- **5,280** adaptive swim lessons yearly
- **30** Summer Camp attendees in **2023**



2022-23 KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

This is an exciting time of growth and achievement at Connections. Here are highlights from the last school year.



Secured Our Space

Our building was purchased by Building Hope, a nonprofit foundation that helps charter schools buy buildings as well as providing other facility, financial and operational services. With this, we have been able to initiate a more favorable lease, replace the roof and install new air conditioning units, creating a better environment for our students and adult clients.



Completed the Purchase of Our School Bus

Thanks to the generosity of our community of donors, we were able to complete the purchase of our new school bus. This larger, more modern school bus is designed specifically for children with special needs and includes the latest safety features. Already in use, the bus enables us to transport students and clients to adaptive swim lessons as well as field trips and community-based learning opportunities.



Built a Working Garden On-Site

With the help of the PGA Community Outreach Committee and Growing Together Farm, we built a working garden along the side of our building. The garden gives our students and clients hands-on learning opportunities, and the harvest is shared at school to help expand the diets of self-restricted eaters. When children see how food grows, they're more interested in trying things like healthy fruits and vegetables. Our adult clients regularly tend to the garden.



Expanded Our Board

We have added several new, highly credentialed members to our charter school's Board of Directors. These new board members are committed to the success of Connections and bring significant expertise in their professional areas as well as strong community connections.



Graduated 8 Adults from the Recipes for Success Program

A local nonprofit, Extraordinary Charities, launched an innovative program called Recipes for Success through which adults with special needs can learn culinary skills and then take the industry's culinary exam with accommodations. We're proud to say that eight of our adult clients successfully completed this program in the spring of 2023 and now hold the SafeServe® certificate required to work in the culinary field.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

We've formed strong partnerships with local and national organizations in order to give our students and adult clients greater opportunities to learn and engage with the community. Here are highlights.



We partner with this amazing organization to bring inclusive sports to our students. Through these sports, our students work on motor skills, balance, coordination, memory and fitness all while having fun. These sports also give students a way to connect with neighbors and others in the community. We are honored to have earned the Special Olympics' designation as a Unified Champion School, reflecting our commitment to promoting inclusive sports for all.

This local nonprofit offers a program called Recipes for Success that teaches culinary skills to adults with special needs. Led by accomplished chef Gregory Schiff, these classes teach kitchen safety, food safety, cooking and serving. In spring 2023, we celebrated as eight of our clients graduated from Recipes for Success. Each passed the culinary exam given with accommodations and earned a SafeServe® certificate, which opens the door to holding a job in the culinary field.

The logo for the Drowning Prevention Coalition of Palm Beach County, featuring a stylized hand inside a life preserver with the text "Drowning Prevention Coalition" and "Palm Beach County".

Water safety is a top priority for our community, and we partnered with the Drowning Prevention Coalition of Palm Beach County to hold free parent seminars. These seminars reinforce the skills we teach students during our one-on-one adaptive swim lessons to combat the high rate of drowning among children with autism.



We Value All of Our Community Partners:

- All-Tag Security
- American Heart Association
- Big Brothers Big Sisters
- Drive Shack
- Drowning Prevention Coalition of Palm Beach County
- Early Learning Coalition of Palm Beach County
- FAU CARD
- First Tee
- Florida Panthers Foundation
- Lynn University Conservatory of Music
- Mike Menor - Growing Together Farm
- Palm Beach Atlantic
- Palm Beach County Park and Recreation
- Palm Beach County Youth Services Department
- Palm Beach Gardens Community Outreach Committee
- Palm Beach State (Dental Hygiene Program)
- Pediatric Partners
- Peggy's Pantry of Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League
- PGA Community Outreach Committee
- School District of Palm Beach County
- Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center

KEY EVENTS

2023 CONNECTIONS GALA *Hearts & Hands*

Enchanted Garden of Hope

An incredible group of supporters spent an evening in the Enchanted Garden of Hope at our 2023 Hearts & Hands Gala in February and helped raise a record-setting \$480,000 to support Connections. Guests enjoyed a cocktail reception, live music from students at the Lynn University Conservatory of Music, dinner, dancing with the Krush Party Band, a silent auction and a celebration of the progress students are making while attending Connections. The event featured WPTV's Michael Williams as the master of ceremonies and a moving recognition of this year's special honorees who have made significant contributions to the school's mission of empowering students and young adults with autism.

Thank you to all the attendees, donors, sponsors
and volunteers who helped make this our
most successful gala yet!



EVENT HONOREES



INDIVIDUAL HONOREE: Debra Johnson

Debra Johnson is a beloved educator of 35+ years and leader who has dedicated her life to helping children with special needs. Currently the Executive Director and Principal of Connections, Debra is the heart and soul of our school and has poured herself into opening its doors and enabling its growth so that children with autism have access to the support they need.

In a world that sees limits for children with autism, Debra sees great possibilities. She sees how they learn and how hard they work to communicate and gain skills. She has created a culture of excellence, respect and compassion where students can thrive. "Students with special needs teach you more than you teach them," she says.



CORPORATE HONOREE: Rooney's Golf Foundation

Rooney's Golf Foundation is a nonprofit organization based in West Palm Beach that began as a charitable golf tournament and has grown into a far-reaching group that produces seven annual events to raise funds for multiple charities, including Connections. In recent years, Rooney's has selected Connections as a beneficiary for the Rooney's 5k Run and Overcomer Breakfast. In addition to financial benefits, this selection has given Connections the opportunity to reach new audiences with our message of autism acceptance and

inclusion while informing others about the work we do and the significant impact our supporters make.



CORPORATE HONOREE: Florentino Ortiz

Florentino Ortiz's tireless volunteer efforts have made a profound impact on our school and the children we serve. He has taken on various tasks, ranging from repairing air conditioning units to fixing plumbing problems, to helping keep our building in good condition. He is always willing to help and always brings a smile and cheerful spirit. "This is a special place, and I'm happy to be able to help with some of their needs," Florentino adds.



Special Thanks!

Gala Co-Chairs:
Carol Kaufman and Laura Pope

Gala Committee Members:

Charleen Decort, Dawn Donohue, Kathy Edenzon, Debra Johnson, Sonia Kay,
Ken Kretschman, Orlando Ortiz, Aura Ortiz, Jason Portman,
Valerie Silverman, Amy Thompson

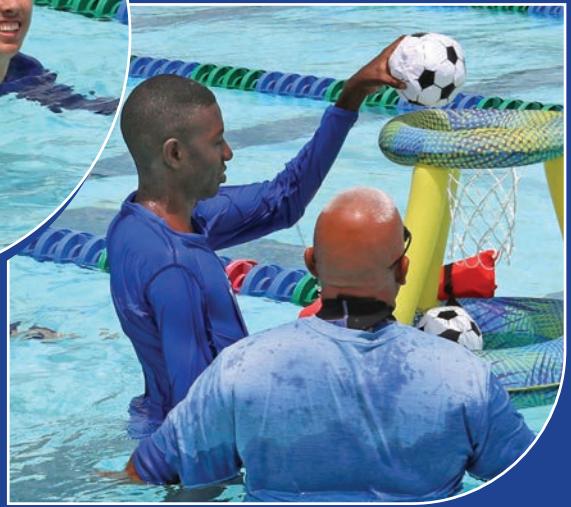
KEY EVENTS



Draw the Line on Drowning

As the prevalence of autism reaches unprecedented levels, it's never been more important to understand the needs of those impacted by autism and ensure that essential services are available. During Autism Acceptance Month in April 2023, Connections highlighted the fact that drowning is the No. 1 cause of death for children with autism who are 160 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers.

Our classes and parents engaged in a peer-to-peer fundraiser to Draw the Line on Drowning by raising money for our aquatics program. Boosted by a generous donor who gave a 2x match, this successful campaign raised \$32,743 for our adaptive swim lessons and earned media coverage on WPTV. We are incredibly grateful to our match donor and everyone who participated in this campaign!



Our classroom winners included:

- **Most Amount Raised**
Connections Adult Program (CAP)
- **Highest Number of Donors**
CAP & Ms. Maria's Class Tied
- **Most Laps Completed**
Ms. Janine's & Ms. Treena's Classes
Tied



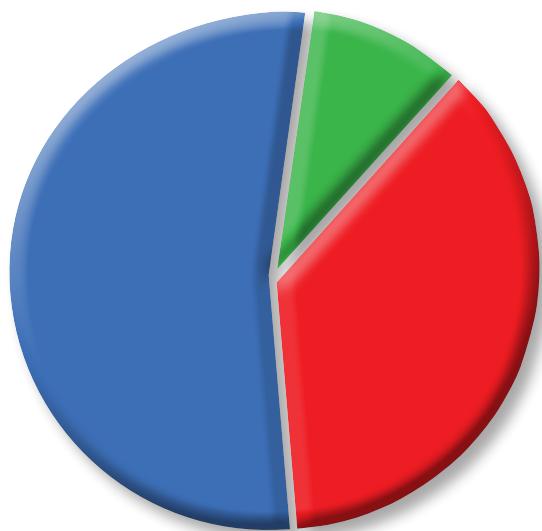
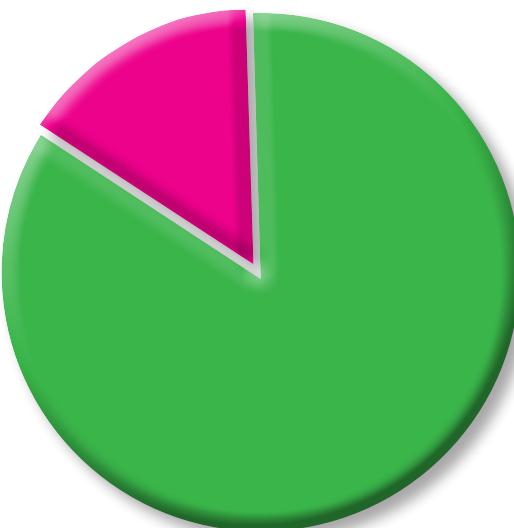
LIVES YOU'RE IMPACTING



STRONG FINANCIAL DISCIPLINE

Operating Expenses

- ▲ Charter School\$4,635,902
- ▲ High School & Adult.....\$1,009,677

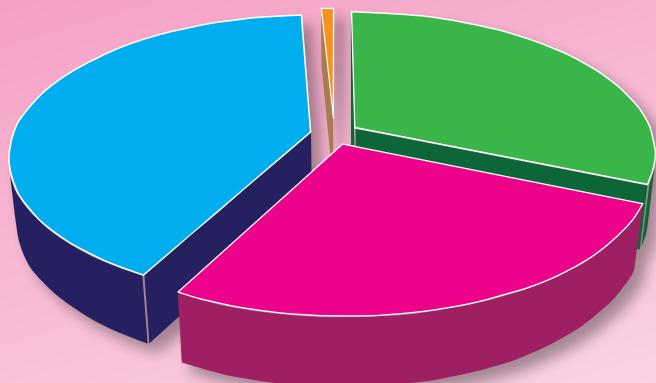


Operating Revenue

- ▲ Charter School\$3,326,572
- ▲ High School & Adult.....\$623,516
- ▲ Gap (Met Through Fundraising Efforts)\$1,868,520

Fundraising Sources to Cover the 30%+ Gap

Public funding for our students falls short of the cost to provide the specialized instruction and therapies they need. We depend on and appreciate our generous donors who bridge the funding gap.



- ▲ Grants\$775,504
- ▲ Individual Gifts\$587,004
- ▲ Events\$491,026
- ▲ PTO\$14,986

WHAT'S NEXT

There's never been a greater need for the services we provide. Autism rates continue to climb, and we remain at capacity. Our five-year, strategic plan calls for an expansion so that we can meet the needs of more students and adults who need our services.

In the coming year, our top priorities include:



Build a Sensory-Friendly Playground

Thanks to incredibly generous donors, we are preparing to open a full, sensory-friendly playground where our students can exercise muscles and meet sensory needs in a safe space outdoors. Research has shown that movement and play enable children to have better attention, focus and communication during academic activities.

Expand Our Sensory Room

Many students with autism need a safe space where they can have controlled sensory experiences in order to feel calm, self-regulate, increase tolerance to specific sensory stimuli and more. Our expanded sensory room will be equipped with the tools to accomplish this important work so that students can return to the classroom ready to learn.

Launch the Connections Cares Family Assistance Program

This new program will support the mental health of the child and family, empower parents to enable their child to function well within the family, and provide resources to meet basic needs.

Building Improvements

With our new lease in place, we will continue improving our facility to create a safer, more effective learning environment. Upcoming enhancements include elevator improvements and the installation of a perimeter security fence.

Open Our Food Pantry

With the addition of a second, commercial-grade refrigerator and our partnership with the Palm Beach County Food Bank, we are able to open a food pantry complete with perishable products to help ensure our students and families in the Connections community do not go hungry.

Continually Improve Classrooms

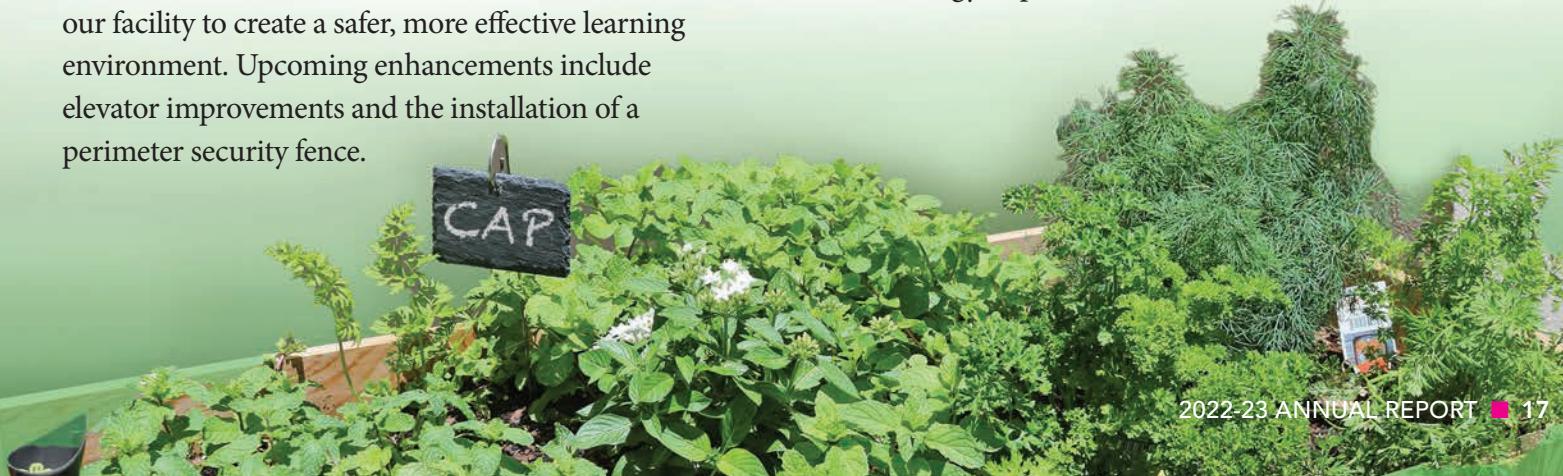
We'll continue equipping our teachers and students with advanced technology and proven tools that help students reach their full potential.

Expand Our Vocational Center

To give our high school students and adult clients more opportunities to gain job-ready skills, we're expanding our vocational center and opening our Sunflower Shoppe on-site.

Launch the Task Force on the Future

Our Task Force on the Future of Connections is in the process of planning to meet the long-term needs of our growing school and center. This group includes board members and community members who evaluate the need for additional classroom space as well as a gym, pool and more.



THANK YOU SUPPORTERS

Myrna Black Abramowitz
Lawrence and Patricia Abramson
Martha Ackerman
Daily Acosta
Gregory T. Adams
Audrey Ades
Joshua Adler
Amanda Aeschilman
Amanda Albright
Carlene Alexander
Marcy Allen
Tracy Alpern
Jalicia Anderson
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– Addy van Leeuwen, Connections Donor

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"Have you ever watched a child work really hard day after day to learn a skill and then finally get it? That moment is magical, and I have a front-row seat to that kind of growth every day.

When a child learns to decode a word, solves a math problem, makes a friend or swims the full length of the pool, it's the best feeling.

We've seen such amazing progress at Connections, and I'm filled with hope for the individuals we serve."

*- Debra Johnson,
Executive Director & Principal*

