



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 29, 2025
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Connections Announces New Leadership as Cofounder and Executive Director Debra Johnson Retires After 50 Years in Education

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla., May 29, 2025 — Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches and Connections High School & Vocational Center announce a leadership transition as longtime Executive Director and Principal Debra Johnson retires after a 50-year career in special education.

Johnson cofounded both organizations and, over the past decade, guided their extraordinary growth, from serving 22 students to more than 140 individuals today. Her career in special education has been defined by compassion, innovation and unwavering advocacy for students and adults with autism. Johnson's vision extended far beyond the classroom; she recognized that serving a student with autism means supporting the entire family. Through her leadership, Connections became a place where parents, siblings and caregivers found understanding, resources and a sense of community, as well as hope for the future.

"Debra's legacy is written in the lives she has touched and the futures she has shaped," says incoming Executive Director and fellow Cofounder Jason Portman. "She is a gifted educator whose heart and leadership have left an indelible mark on our community. Debra always took into account the needs of the whole family, ensuring that every child and adult we serve — and their loved ones — have the opportunity to thrive. We are forever grateful for her guidance and friendship."

As Johnson retires, the Board of Directors for each organization has approved the following new leadership team, effective July 1, 2025:

- **Jason Portman**, Executive Director of Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches and Connections High School & Vocational Center. A proven leader with a background in school operations and relationship management, Portman began his career with the Florida Marlins and Florida Panthers before moving into nonprofit education leadership serving students with autism more than 15 years ago. As a founding member of Connections, he has overseen technology, fundraising, facility expansion and daily operations throughout the school's rapid growth.
- **Melissa Carman**, Principal of Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches. A founding staff member of Connections, Carman brings deep expertise in curriculum, staff development and classroom strategies for students with autism in Pre-K through 8th grade. She earned a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Pittsburgh, with a focus in child development, psychology and education. Early in her teaching career, she discovered a passion for working with children on the autism spectrum and has since led the development of specialized programs.

- **Pamela Ludwick**, Principal of Connections High School & Vocational Center and Director of Adult Services. A founding team member of Connections, Ludwick leads curriculum planning, staff development and parent engagement for students in grades 9–12. She also works closely with community partners to create meaningful volunteer and vocational opportunities for high schoolers and adult clients. Her leadership has been key in expanding experiences that enable students and adults with autism to build independence and form stronger connections in the community.

This team is united in the mission of addressing the urgent and growing need for high-quality, compassionate services for students and adults with autism in Palm Beach County. Connections supports more than 140 enrolled individuals, many from underserved communities, with over 85 percent of students living below the poverty line. The organization relies on the generosity of donors to bridge a funding gap and provide comprehensive programs that extend beyond the classroom.

While honoring Johnson’s legacy, the new leadership team looks forward with hope and determination to continue building a future where all individuals with autism — and their families — are empowered and valued.

For more information about Connections, visit connectedpb.com.

About Connections

Connections is a nonprofit educational center that delivers specialized education, therapies, vocational training and life-skills development for students with autism in Palm Beach County. The organization serves students ages 3-22 and offers an innovative day program for adults with autism. Learn more at connectedpb.com.

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