

**Building a
world where
we all belong**

You're more connected to autism than you may think

Today, 1 in 44 children in America is diagnosed with autism. That significant prevalence means that autism is no longer someone else's concern. It's a part of all of our lives.

Even if you don't have a child, grandchild or family member with autism yet, you now live in a world where you will interact with people with autism in daily life -- at work, in the store, at the gym, at the club.

We're all connected to autism and we all have a responsibility to help. You might help by donating funds, volunteering your time, learning how to interact more effectively with people on the autism spectrum or intentionally being kind to those who have autism.



At Connections of the Palm Beaches, we're helping by **building a world where we all belong**, including those with autism and their families.

We're a nonprofit educational center specifically designed to serve students with autism and related disabilities to help them **reach their full potential**. These students are not well served by public schools, and 80% of our students come from disadvantaged families who cannot afford expensive private schools. After age 22, there's **little to no supportive program available** so these students often have no place they belong outside their parents' home.

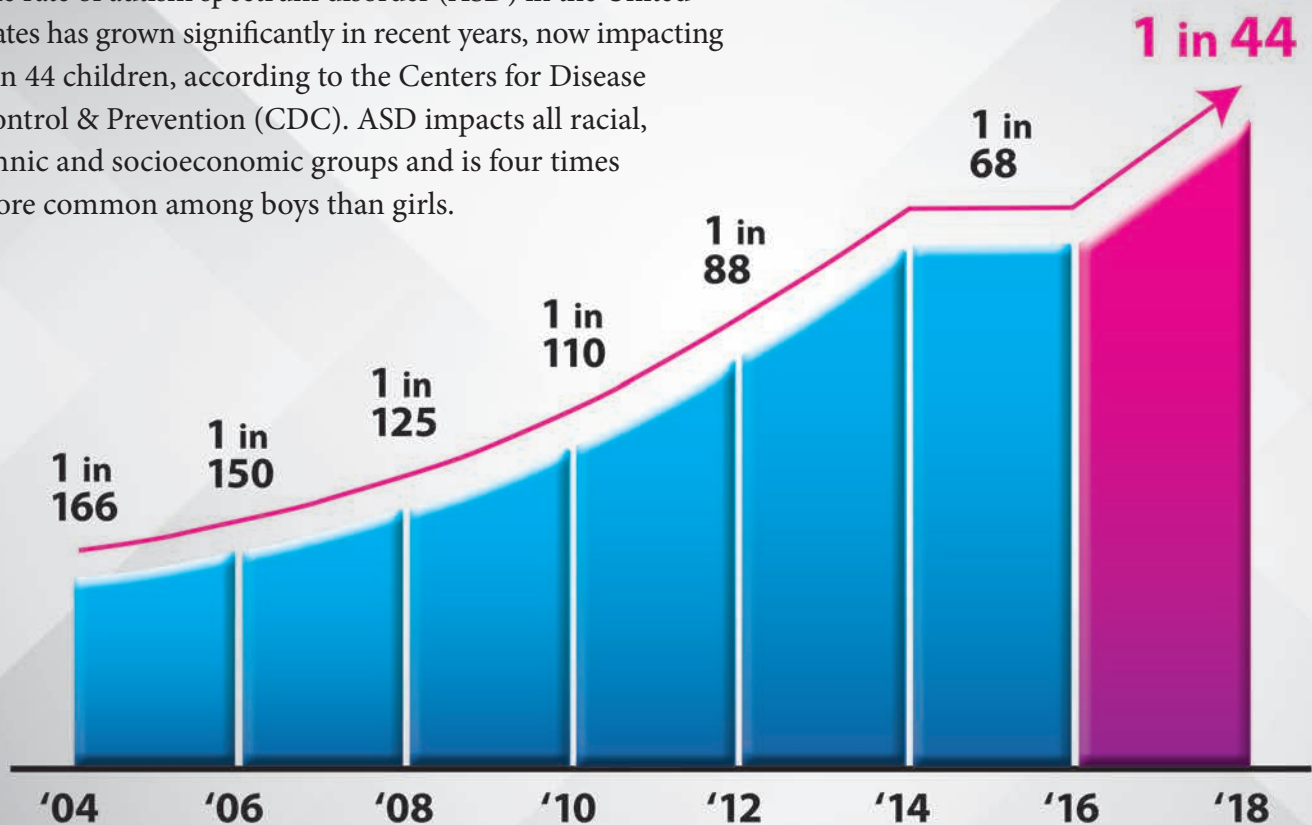
Connections is designed to meet the needs of students with autism from Pre-K through young adulthood.

We invite you to partner with us to **extend your impact** and help a vulnerable group that is often underserved in our community.



Increasing Autism Prevalence

The rate of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the United States has grown significantly in recent years, now impacting 1 in 44 children, according to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). ASD impacts all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups and is four times more common among boys than girls.





A Message From Leadership

Welcome to the Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches' annual report to the community for the 2021-22 fiscal year. In the seven years we have served as Executive Director and Board President, we are proud of remaining true to our mission by staying focused on our students, families and the community we serve. We are inspired by our donors, partners and staff who have risen to the unprecedented challenges of this past year. They have demonstrated resilience, creativity and dedication to the Connections' community.

Connections continues to grow, innovate and improve our services. We strive to enhance awareness of the capabilities of people with autism, accept all students as they are, and advocate for education and programs that will enable their successful integration into our community.

This year, we returned to a sense of normalcy with students attending class and having a variety of opportunities in the community. But this period of upheaval is not yet over. The pandemic and its side effects, like student regression, inflation, supply chain problems and staff shortages, still present challenges to our most vulnerable students and their families.

On a positive note, we learned many lessons from the pandemic. We learned that:

- our students and families are resilient
- our staff is creative and persistent in making sure each student is served well
- technology enables enhanced flexibility in educating the students and
- if we help our families meet their basic needs, both students and families do better.

Highlights for this year include the continued funding and expansion of our innovative Health, Wellness & Aquatics Program. Our nutrition program has expanded to include classroom Aerogardens where students can plant, nurture and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Our aquatics program is now held four days a week. Funding was obtained for an additional school bus so we can transport students to swim lessons and expand our community-based instruction. (Inflation has created an unexpected need to augment funds raised, which we'll do this year.) We also launched our new strategic plan, giving Connections a road map for growth and improvement for the next five years.

We are proud to report that this year our Annual Hearts and Hands Gala was the most successful to date, and our annual fundraising efforts reached our goal of \$1,000,000. We are incredibly fortunate to be supported by so many giving individuals, foundations, and corporate sponsors. You fuel our mission, and because of your commitment to those we serve, Connections will be able to continue providing and improving the services we offer to our students and their families.

We hope that whether you have invested in Connections for years or if you're new to the Connections community that you will be inspired by this report and join us in supporting students with autism and their families so we can build a world where everyone belongs.

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

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

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



Get to Know Connections

Incredible Growth in 8 Years of Service

Charter School -- 2015 to 2022 -- from **22** to **86** students

High School -- 2017 to 2022 -- from **8** to **25**

Adult Program -- 2020 to 2022 -- **6** to **12**

Staff -- 2015 to 2022 -- from **8** to **82**

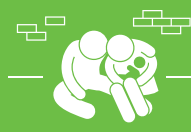
The Students & Families We Serve



Our students range on the autism spectrum and need moderate to high support.



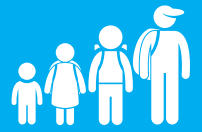
Each student in Pre-K - high school has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that identifies the goals and learning strategies for the coming year.



More than 80% of our students come from low-income families.



Each student's family supports the school with 40 hours of volunteer work every year.

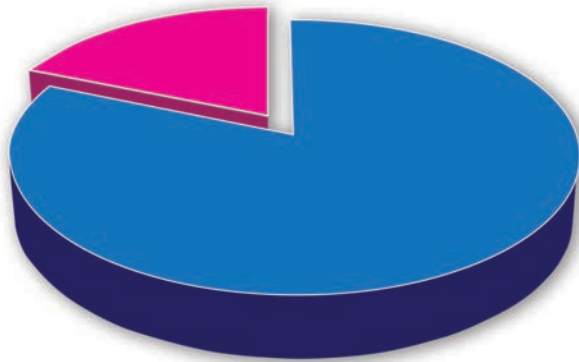


Our students range in age from 3-22 and young adults are 23+.



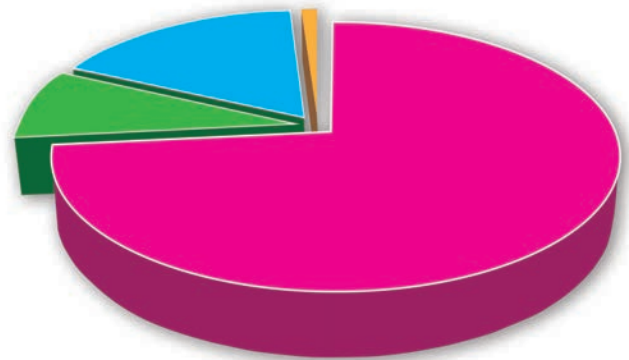
Strong Fiscal Discipline

2021-22 School Year



Operating Expenses

- Charter School.....\$4,215,894
- High School & Adult\$977,320

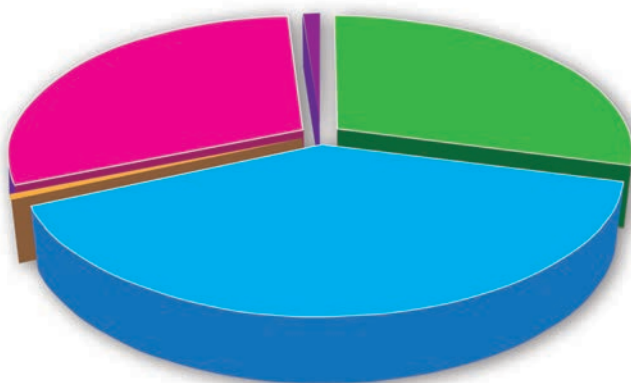


Operating Revenue

- Charter School..... \$4,118,559
- PPP..... \$483,970
- High School \$951,568
- Adult Program..... \$58,133

Fundraising Sources

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.



- Individual Gifts.....\$490,395
- Events.....\$377,267
- Grants\$365,200
- PTO\$14,104
- Corporate Sponsorships.....\$5,000



What We Do

OUR MISSION

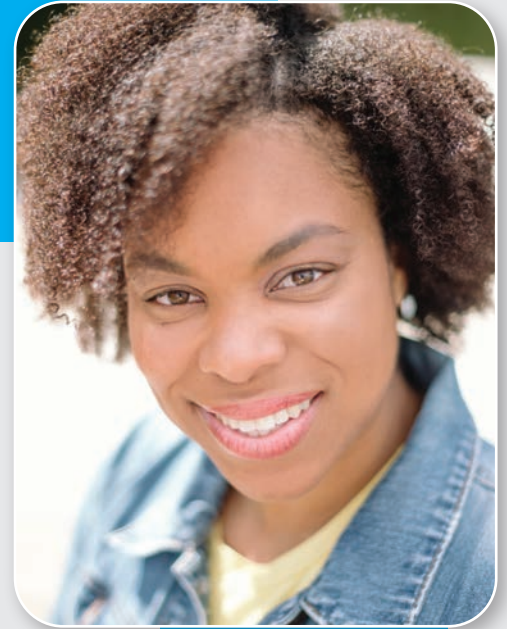
To empower students with autism and related disabilities to learn academic, social, vocational and independent-living skills using evidence-based strategies and a family-centered approach.

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.



Teacher SPOTLIGHT



"My connection to autism is through my profession as an occupational therapist. I previously worked at an outpatient facility at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta where I helped families and children who were early in their autism diagnosis or going through the evaluation process.

"When the time came to move to Florida, I was drawn to Connections by the chance to work in-house at a school for kids with autism.

"I love how this team rallies together in good times and hard times. And I love how this team really cares for students and families. Caring truly is the core of Connections."

-- Patrikka Georges, OTR/L
Occupational Therapist



How We Do It

Connections Education Center

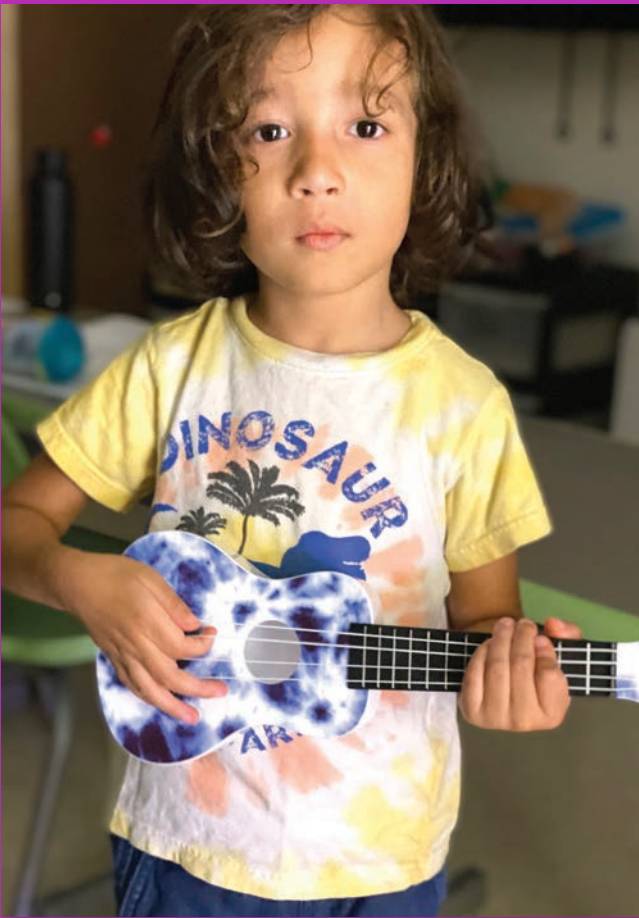
As a Palm Beach County charter school specifically designed for students with autism spectrum disorder or related disabilities, our school serves students ages 3-14 residing in Palm Beach County. We use evidence-based teaching strategies paired with targeted therapies to provide the valuable early intervention that's critical for students with autism. We collaborate with parents to design the best plan for the child and to enable families to reinforce learning at home and in the community.

Connections High School & Vocational Program

This private high school provides a unique learning opportunity for students ages 15-22. We weave together functional academics and vocational training while building social and independent-living skills to help older students with autism transition into adulthood.

Connections Adult Program (CAP)

This innovative program enables students with autism who are over the age of 22 to continue learning new skills and to retain the skills they've worked so hard to master. We focus on social skills and community integration such as recreational and cultural activities. We also teach independent-living skills -- such as cooking, personal care, goal setting, banking and holding a job -- to enable our young adults to be as self-sufficient as possible whether living in or beyond their parents' home.



Targeted Therapies Make a Difference

Our team of certified, experienced therapists deliver quality therapies at Connections. Because students with autism vary in their communication and social abilities, behavioral challenges, motor coordination abilities and sensory needs, we provide speech therapy, occupational therapy and behavioral therapy to students in Pre-K through high school during the school day. In addition, our therapists work closely with classroom teachers and students' families to further drive success.

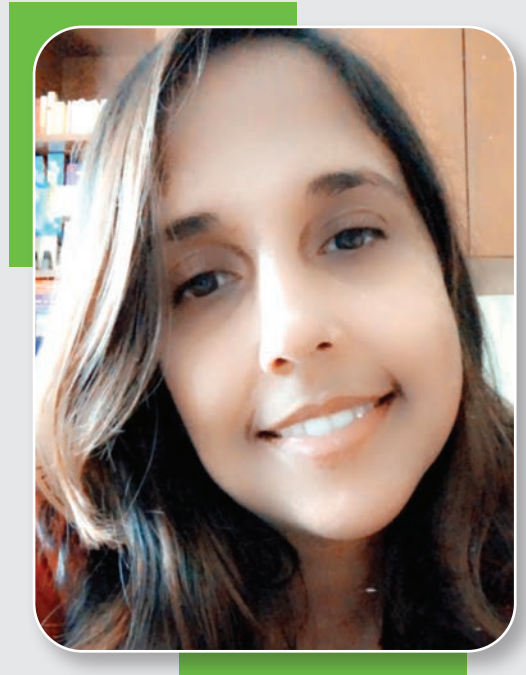


An Innovative Health, Wellness & Aquatics Program

Building on our highly successful water safety and swimming program that combats the high occurrence of drowning among kids with autism, this program now offers every student the opportunity to learn about kitchen safety, healthy eating, fitness, functional leisure and more!



Parent SPOTLIGHT



"I'm connected to autism through my son Jameson who is on the spectrum and attends Connections. I'm also connected through my work within the autism field.

"What I love most about Connections is how they create a personal connection with the students and their families. Here, we're not just another number. We've gotten to know the administration and staff personally and can see how much they care. They value our input on our child's experience at Connections, and they help connect us with other families and any resources we may need. That's so rare these days.

"My son is happy and making great progress at Connections!"

-- Milly Corbo

*Parent of Jameson Corbo,
3rd Grader at Connections*



2021-22 Highlights

Thanks to the incredible generosity of our donors and supporters, Connections served more students than ever before! Our student body grew to 117, and we were able to maintain our low student-staff ratio that's essential to our effective, safe, nurturing environment.

We were also able to supply the adaptive technology and materials our students need to communicate and learn.

Here are other key advancements:

Expanded Health, Wellness & Aquatics Program

The top floor of our school has been renovated to house our newly expanded Health, Wellness & Aquatics Program. This new learning area features:

- a working kitchen where students can learn how to safely prepare a meal
- a nutrition center where kids learn about healthy food choices and are encouraged to try healthy foods they may not prefer
- an apartment-style space where students learn how to do laundry, clean dishes and master more independent-living skills
- a game room where students learn leisure skills that give them the opportunity to better connect with their families and community.



New School Bus

Significant progress was made toward the purchase of a much-needed school bus. This transportation is essential for our life-saving swim program so we can transport kids to and from the pool during the school day. Every child in our school has access to a 1:1 swim lesson each week.

The bus is also vital to our community inclusion program where our teachers and staff take kids into the community to teach life skills such as selecting items at a store, paying for merchandise, handling unexpected sensory input and much more. These skills help our students be able to participate in outings with their families and be part of the community.

AeroGardens Bring Plant Sciences to Life

A generous grant from the BallenIsles Charity Foundation enabled us to purchase AeroGardens for our classrooms. This visual, hands-on learning helps our students better understand plant life cycles and see how food grows.



What's Next

With the prevalence of autism on the rise and already impacting 1 out of every 44 children in America, there's never been a greater need for a place like Connections.

Our five-year strategic plan looks to expand Connections in order to help more students and families as well as to be of service to the entire community as we build a future where everyone belongs.

Some of our key initiatives include:

Complete the Purchase of the New School Bus

To replace our aging bus and transport students to lessons in the pool and community.

Expand & Improve Our Facility

For streamlined operations and expenses as we maintain a safe, adaptive space for our students with autism.

Build an Autism-Friendly Playground

To let our wonderful students exercise muscles and meet sensory needs in a safe space outdoors. Movement and play enable children to have better attention, focus and communication during academic activities.

Launch Our Family Resource and Assistance Program

To provide family educators who offer home-based teaching, mental health assistance and, eventually, respite support.

Redesign Our Sunflower Shoppe

To facilitate real-world vocational opportunities for our students while building a new source of revenue.

Continually Improve Classrooms

To leverage advancing technology and best practices in teaching students with autism so they can reach their full potential.

Corporate Sponsor SPOTLIGHT



Rooney's Golf Foundation

"What connects us to autism and Connections is our shared belief that people are what matter most. We love the work that Connections does and are pleased to raise funds and awareness to support their mission."

-- Patrick J. Rooney, Jr.

CEO of Palm Beach Kennel Club, which selected Connections as a beneficiary of their Overcomer Breakfast and Rooney's 5k Run



2022 CONNECTIONS GALA
Hearts & Hands

...An Evening Under the Stars...

Our “Evening Under the Stars” was a lovely evening hosted by Michael Williams with laughter, tears and celebrations of our students’ accomplishments. The evening raised over \$350,000 for our school!

Thank you to all the attendees, donors and volunteers for making the gala a phenomenal success!



Event Honorees

Individual Honorees: Brenda & Chuck McGarrity

“We are led by our hearts to help,” says Brenda McGarrity. She and Chuck have been incredible supporters of Connections and have helped spread the word about our school’s impact and pressing needs throughout the Old Marsh community.



Corporate Honoree: Pediatric Partners

Pediatric Partners is a well-regarded pediatric primary care group here in Palm Beach County and is known for providing exceptional care for all children including those who need behavioral care, developmental care, social support and psychological services. They generously provided the Covid testing and vaccinations to our staff, students and families in 2021.



Staff Honoree: Jason Portman

As one of the founders of Connections, Jason has been instrumental in taking our vision for Connections and helping to make it a reality. He tirelessly works to make the lives of our students, families and staff better, and he does so with kindness, grace, compassion and of course, humor.

Special Thanks!

Gala Chairs:

Carol Kaufman, Laura Pope and Paola Herrera

Gala Committee Members:

Treena Catalfamo, Charleen Decort, Dawn Donohue, Debra Johnson, Sonia Kay, Dana Kimberly, Ken Kretschman, Pamela Ludwick, Orlando Ortiz, Patti Rao, Valerie Silverman



Donor SPOTLIGHT



"I'm connected to autism through my son Chris who was diagnosed when he was 2½ years old. We've lived with autism for 16 years now.

"When we found Connections, we were coming off of a very traumatic experience that Chris had in public school. We instantly felt how devoted Connections is to each child's development and progress but also to the care of the family. Everyone's well being is taken into consideration, and it's been incredible for us.

"Chris is thriving beyond everyone's expectations and we love being part of the Connections family."

-- Laura Pope,
Connections Donor,
Volunteer & Parent



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Make an Impact

Give and Help Us Build a World Where Everyone Belongs

Donations

Make a tax-deductible contribution to Connections in the form of cash, stocks, or mutual fund shares for operational support, programs or capital. Or direct your gift to the Connect to the Future Fund to support highest priority needs.

Matching Gifts

Many employers will match your donation. Send your employer's matching gift form to Connections with your contribution.

Donor-Advised Funds (DAF)

Making a gift through DAF Direct is convenient and offers a streamlined, centralized way to support the organizations you value most.

Endowment

Consider making a legacy gift by including Connections in your estate planning. Your gift will become part of a permanently held endowment at the Community Foundation of Palm Beach and Martin Counties to benefit the autism community in perpetuity.

Planned Giving

Remember Connections in your will or trust to leave a lasting legacy that will help us continue empowering students with autism and building a future where everyone belongs.

3 Easy Ways to Give Today

Donate by Mail

Connections Education Center
1301 Old Congress Ave., Suite 100
West Palm Beach, FL 33409



Donate by Phone

Call: 561-328-6044

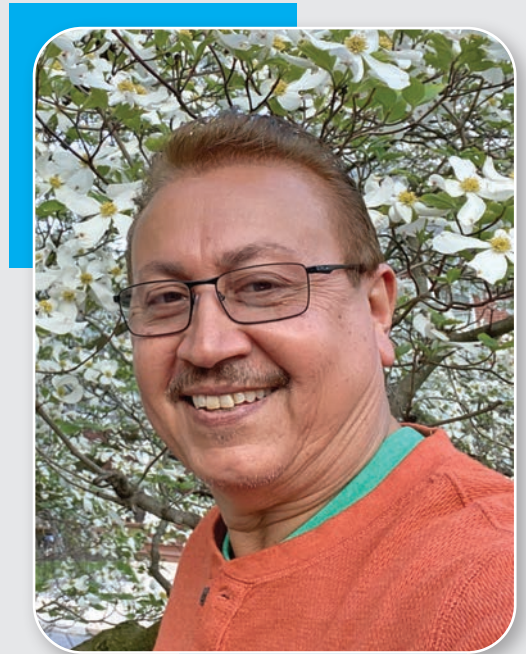


Donate Online

www.connectedpb.com/donate



Volunteer SPOTLIGHT



"I'm connected to autism through my granddaughter Natalie who is a high schooler at Connections.

"I started volunteering at Connections because I wanted to help make sure these kids have a good future. The more time I spent at the school, the more I wanted to be there. It's so peaceful at Connections and everyone is so nice. I'm usually there 4-5 hours a day fixing things and helping with maintenance.

"This is a special place, and I'm happy to be able to help with some of their needs."

*-- Florentino Ortiz
Connections Volunteer &
Grandfather of Student
Natalie Ortiz*





1310 Old Congress Avenue
West Palm Beach, FL 33409

561.328.6044

www.connectedpb.com

**You're more
connected to
autism than
you may think**

