



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

As we reflect on the first half of 2026, I am filled with gratitude for the extraordinary partnerships and shared commitment that continue to move ConnectED Polk forward.

This Mid-Year Impact Report is more than a collection of numbers and accomplishments. It is a reflection of what is possible when education, industry, and community come together with a shared purpose: ensuring that every student in Polk County has the opportunity to discover, prepare for, and pursue a successful future.

Because of the dedication of our Investor Advocates, Board members, Strategic Partners, educators, business leaders, and volunteers, thousands of students are gaining meaningful exposure to careers, connecting with professionals, exploring new pathways, and taking important steps toward their futures. Together, we are strengthening the connection between what students learn today and the opportunities that await them tomorrow.

Our work remains centered on three strategic pillars: Innovation, Access, and Engagement, and the momentum we have built together is creating a strong foundation for continued growth in the months ahead.

Thank you for believing in this work and, more importantly, for being part of it. Your partnership is helping us create stronger connections, build a more prepared workforce, and ensure that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

I invite you to take a moment to celebrate what we have accomplished together so far this year, and to look ahead with us to the opportunities still to come.



Dr. Melody Rider
President, ConnectED Polk

CONNECTED POLK MID YEAR IMPACT REPORT

Inspiring Students. Connecting Industry. Strengthening Our Community.

The first half of 2026 has demonstrated the power of partnership. Through the collective leadership of our Investor Advocates, Executive and Advisory Board members, Strategic Partners, educators, business leaders, and volunteers, ConnectED Polk continues to strengthen the bridge between education and the workforce by creating meaningful career-connected learning opportunities for students across Polk County. Our work is centered on three strategic pillars: **Innovation, Access, and Engagement**, ensuring every student has the opportunity to discover, prepare for, and pursue a successful future.

2025-2026 By the Numbers:

Over 48,000 students exploring careers through SchoolLinks

427 business leaders engaged

133 career engagement events hosted

4,200+ students directly impacted

1,200+ volunteer mentoring hours provided

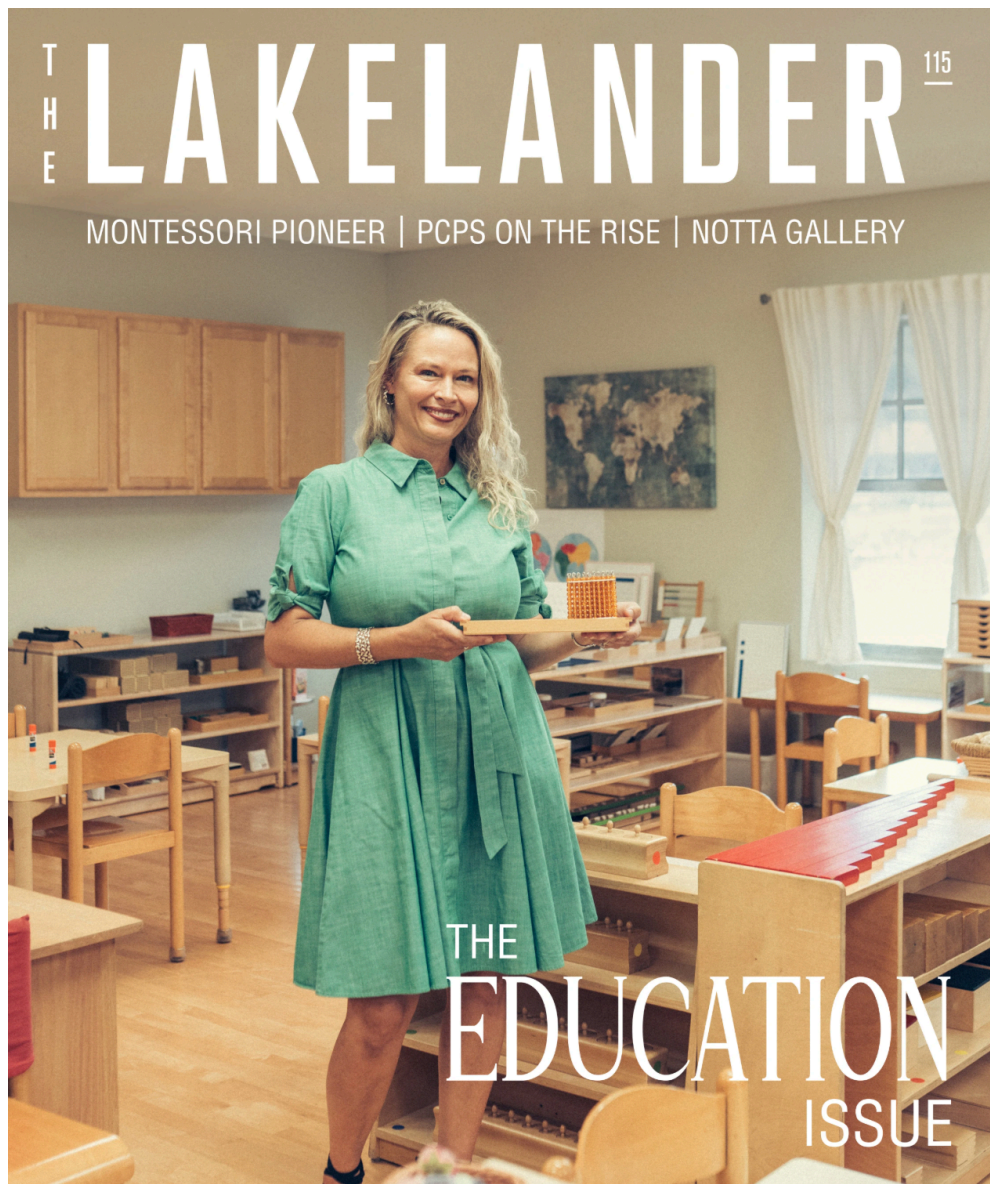
198 internship applications received

40 students placed in internships

26 Direct hires from high school into career paths

17 high schools actively engaged

20,000–25,000 students projected to be served annually through the [JA Barnett Family Discovery Center](#)



2025 Lakeland Education Edition Reach & Impact

Print Distribution:

12,000 magazines Distributed Countywide

42,000 Estimated Print Readers

Digital & Social Engagement:

127,889 Views on Education Issue Posts on Facebook

2,933 Digital Views of the Magazine and Website



Driving Impact Through Partnership:

This year, ConnectED Polk expanded career conversations, workforce readiness workshops, classroom engagement, reverse interviews, career showcases, and mentoring opportunities across healthcare, manufacturing, engineering, information technology, cybersecurity, aerospace, skilled trades, finance, education, media, government, tourism, entrepreneurship, automotive, and human services. Every interaction helps students better understand the opportunities available right here in Polk County.

Innovation continues to drive our work through the expansion of [SchoolLinks](#), the launch of **ConnectED Polk Virtual Field Trips** funded in part by the Empower Hardee*Highlands*Polk grant cycle of GiveWell Community Foundation, new career pathway collaborations with higher education and industry partners, and innovative partnerships including [WonderHere Education Foundation - Philip O'Brien Elementary School](#), [YMCA of West Central Florida](#), and the upcoming healthcare internship pilot with [Lakeland Regional Health](#).

**Growth in Community:**

Advisory Board Members: Jason Rodda of Rodda Construction and TJ Wright of YMCA of West Central Florida

Investor Advocates: Wards Air Conditioning, Visit Central Florida, Suncoast Credit Union, Regal Automotive

Strategic Partners: Wild Dandelions Services, GTE Academy, Unlocked Education, [Books & Cooks](#), Academy Prep, New Beginnings High School, and Top Buttons.

Celebrating Excellence:

Our SOLD OUT 4th Annual Excellence in Partnership Awards Dinner celebrated the educators, businesses, and community leaders who are transforming workforce development through collaboration.

Congratulations to our 2026 award recipients:

Business Partner of the Year (Large): Lakeland Regional Health

Business Partner of the Year (Small): Evans Family Ranch

Academy of the Year: Fort Meade High School – Pharmacy Technician

Academy Trailblazer of the Year: George Jenkins High School – Academy of Cybersecurity

THANK YOU TO OUR 2026 SPONSORS!



Looking Ahead:

The second half of 2026 will focus on expanding business engagement, growing Virtual Field Trips, increasing SchoolLinks participation, launching the [90 Minutes in 90 Days Chamber Challenge](#), expanding ACE Mentoring, supporting the WonderHere and Philip O'Brien Elementary microschool partnership, strengthening regional technology partnerships, and continuing to build scalable pathways from education to employment.

Just 90 minutes of your time in the next 90 days can open minds, spark curiosity, and shape a student's future.

- SHARE YOUR CAREER JOURNEY
- SPEAK IN A CLASSROOM
- PARTICIPATE IN A CAREER CONVERSATION OR PANEL
- HELP STUDENTS EXPLORE CAREERS IN YOUR INDUSTRY

ConnectED Polk is excited to partner with the [Lakeland Chamber of Commerce](#), [Northeast Polk Chamber of Commerce](#), [Greater Bartow Chamber of Commerce](#), and [Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce](#) to launch the **90 Minutes in 90 Days Chamber Challenge**, an invitation for local businesses and professionals to invest just 90 minutes in the next 90 days to help inspire Polk County students.

The concept is simple: **one hour and 30 minutes can make a lasting difference in a student's understanding of what is possible.**

Through the challenge, Chamber members can share their career journey, speak with students in a classroom, participate in a career conversation or panel, or help students better understand the opportunities available within their industry.

ConnectED Polk Makes It Easy!

Businesses don't have to figure out the logistics. ConnectED Polk will coordinate directly with schools, manage scheduling, and provide the support needed to make each engagement meaningful.

Participants simply complete a short interest survey sharing information about their business, industry, and areas of interest. From there, **ConnectED Polk will match their interests with opportunities to connect with students.**

A Small Investment. A Lasting Impact.

The 90 Minutes in 90 Days Challenge gives local employers a simple way to help students:

Share a career journey

Speak in a classroom

Participate in a career conversation or panel

Help students explore careers in their industry

Inspire the next generation of talent

Businesses that complete their 90 minutes will receive the official **ConnectED Polk 90 Minutes in 90 Days Challenge Coin** in recognition of their commitment to Polk County's students and future workforce.

This partnership represents exactly what ConnectED Polk believes is possible when **education, business, and community come together**. By opening the door to even one conversation, a local professional can help a student discover a career, envision a future, and see a pathway to success right here in Polk County.

Give 90 minutes. Inspire a student. Help build Polk County's future workforce. [Register here to take the challenge.](#)



OUR CONNECTED POLK COMMUNITY

Executive Board

GrayRobinson

Lakeland Regional Health

Publix Super Markets

AgAmerica

Saddle Creek Logistics Services
Board of Governors, State of Florida University System
The Baylis Family
Congressman Scott Franklin's Office
Polk County Public Schools

Advisory Board

Lakeland Regional Health
Saddle Creek Logistics Services
Watson Clinic
Publix Super Markets
Orlando Health
IDX Image Depot
City of Lakeland
Springer Construction
GiveWell Community Foundation
CareerSource Polk
YMCA
Rodda Construction
Orlando Health Foundation

Founding Members

Harrell's
Publix Super Markets
Lakeland Economic Development Council
AgAmerica

Community Investors

Aerospace Center for Excellence
MIDFLORIDA Credit Union
Polk State College
MaxPak
GEICO
RS&H
Frescos
Southeastern University
A.D. Morgan
Publix Employees Federal Credit Union
Webber
Register Construction
Gulf Coast Avionics
Mosaic
Regal Automotive
Polk County Waste & Recycling
Wards Air Conditioning
Florida Polytechnic University

Community Impact Giving

Harrell's
George Jenkins Foundation
Bob Adams Foundation
Publix Super Markets Charities
Wesley & Ashley Barnett
Junior Achievement of Tampa Bay

Strategic Partners

Learning Resource Center
Lakeland Chamber of Commerce
Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce
GiveWell Community Foundation
Junior Achievement
Polk County Public Schools
Boys & Girls Clubs of Polk County
Lakeland Vision
Blended Families Foundation
Lakeland IDEA Charter School
The Well
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Polk County
Mulberry Family Support Center
Peace Creek Center for Human Development
Polk Education Foundation
PACE Center for Girls
InterAct Alliance
Bartow Chamber of Commerce
Cypress Montessori Academy
Apostle Henry Ross Family Life Center
WonderHere
Top Buttons
Winter Haven IT Council
High Class Academy
VIVA Polk
Wild Dandelions
New Beginnings High School
Academy Prep Center of Lakeland
Unlocked Education

**Together, we are creating stronger connections, preparing tomorrow's
workforce, and ensuring every student in Polk County has the
opportunity to succeed.**

DONATE TO CONNECTED POLK

Your donation fuels access to education, resources, and opportunity through ConnectED Polk. Together, we can close the gap and open doors.



Become a Advocate

Click here to learn more about how you can engage with our robust network of over 25 educational institutions across Polk County.

Thank you to all our current and new advocates for the work you do!

P.S. Stay tuned to see more monthly newsletters like this one!

Our Contact Information

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