



## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

August marks an exciting new chapter for ConnectED Polk as students, educators, and business partners come together to begin another school year. While the summer months were filled with planning and preparation, we are now putting those plans into action, strengthening connections between Polk County classrooms and the careers, industries, and opportunities that will shape our students' futures.

This year, our work with more than 20 high schools across Polk County is focused on creating meaningful, career-connected experiences for students. From work-based learning and internships to industry exposure, mentorship, and career exploration, we are working alongside educators and employers to ensure students have opportunities to see what is possible and understand how their education connects to their future.

As we enter the 2026-2027 school year, these partnerships are more important than ever. Polk County continues to experience tremendous growth, and with that growth comes an increasing need for a skilled, prepared workforce. Our role is to help ensure that students are not only aware of the opportunities available in their own community, but are equipped with the knowledge, relationships, and experiences necessary to pursue them.

We are also grateful for the continued leadership of our ConnectED Polk Advisory Board and the business and community leaders who generously share their expertise, open their workplaces, welcome students, and invest in the next generation. Their engagement demonstrates what is possible when education and industry work together around a shared vision for our community.

This month's featured stories highlight the people and partnerships making this work possible. Each one reinforces a simple but powerful idea: **students need opportunities to connect what they are learning today to what they can become tomorrow.**

As a new school year begins, I am filled with optimism about what lies ahead.

Thank you to every educator, employer, community partner, volunteer, and supporter who continues to invest in Polk County's students. Together, we are creating stronger connections, opening doors to opportunity, and building the workforce for the community of tomorrow.

With gratitude,

**Dr. Melody Rider**

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## IN FOCUS: MOMENTS THAT MATTER













## CONNECTED POLK NEWS AND UPDATES



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 Partners with Lakeland and Winter Haven Chambers of Commerce to Launch the 90 Minutes in 90 Days Challenge

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

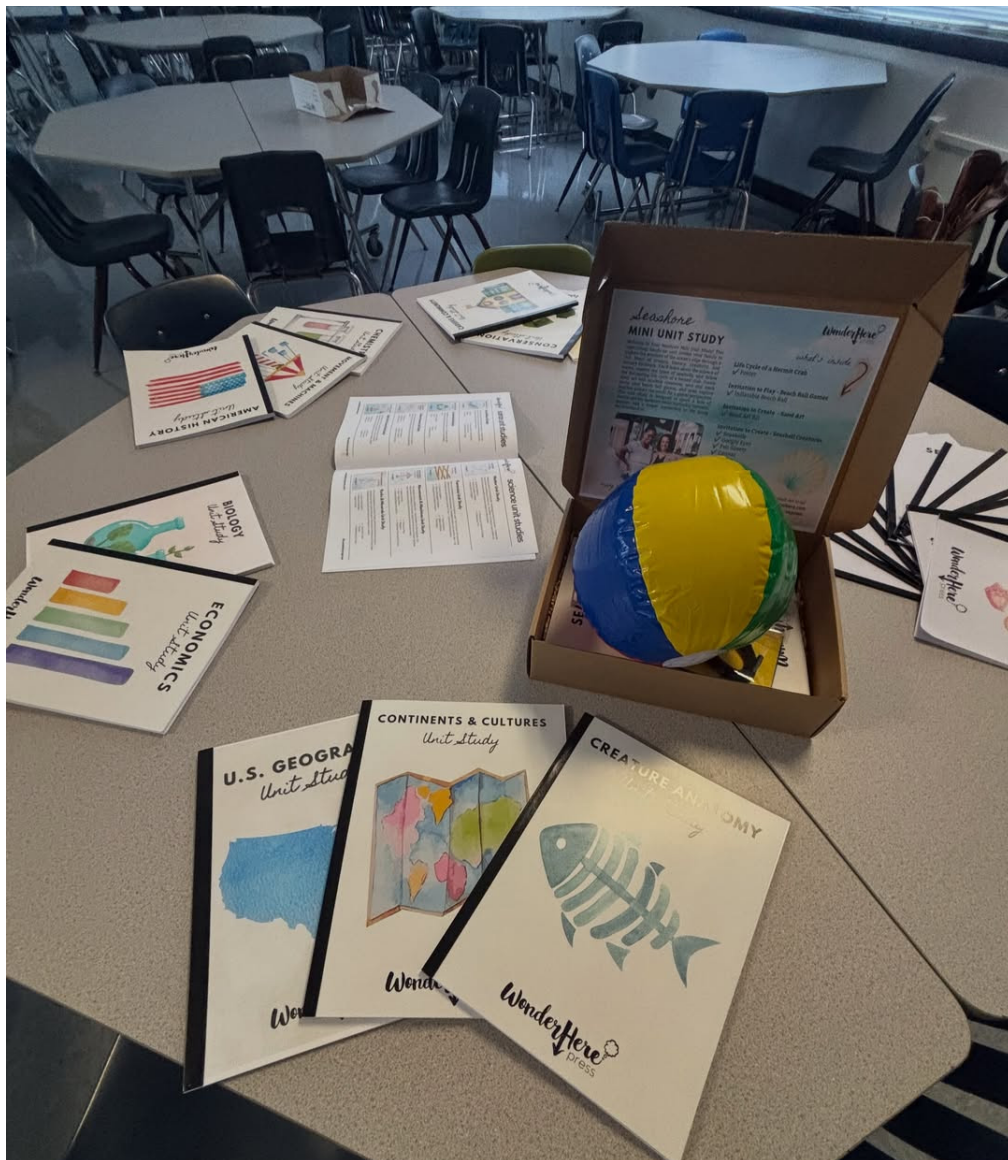
Inspire the next generation of talent

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.**







## More Wonder Is Coming to Polk County!

A different kind of learning opportunity is coming to Philip O'Brien Elementary, and ALL Polk County families (no matter where you're zoned) can now apply for a unique microschool experience.

WonderHere is partnering with Philip O'Brien to launch a new blended kindergarten/first-grade program, designed to offer families an additional educational option rooted in hands-on learning, creativity, and connection.

### This small classroom community will include:

- Project-based, hands-on learning
- Gentle literacy & numeracy instruction
- Personalized support in a small-group setting
- Meaningful parent partnership and engagement

You can also learn more about this program and apply at <https://wonderhere.com/wonderhere-polk-county>.



## THE BARNETT FAMILY DISCOVERY CENTER

### PURCHASE YOUR OWN **LEGACY BRICKS**

LEAVE YOUR LEGACY AT THE JA BARNETT FAMILY  
DISCOVERY CENTER WHEN YOU PURCHASE AN  
ENGRAVED BRICK!

# \$500 / BRICK

LIMITED QUANTITY AVAILABLE

### The Barnett Family Discovery Center

Leave your legacy at the JA Barnett Family Discovery Center! For a \$500 contribution, you can purchase an engraved Legacy Brick that will become a lasting part of our center. Celebrate your impact and inspire future generations today.

Learn more at: <https://japolk.org/ja-discovery-center/>

## 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

ConnectED Polk

