



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends of ConnectED Polk,

Summer is the busiest and most exciting season of the year at ConnectED Polk. While students and educators enjoy a well-deserved break, our team is hard at work planning for the upcoming school year alongside more than 20 high schools across Polk County. Together, we are strategically mapping industry engagement opportunities that will connect students to careers, employers, and real-world experiences throughout the 2026-2027 school year.

As workforce needs continue to evolve, so does our commitment to ensuring students graduate with the skills, awareness, and connections needed to thrive. In the 25/26 school year, we are especially excited to launch our first-ever in-school internship pilot in partnership with Lakeland Regional Health, Lake Gibson High School, and George Jenkins High School. This innovative model will provide students with meaningful workplace experiences while earning academic credit, creating a stronger bridge between classroom learning and career readiness.

We are also proud to welcome Jason Rodda, CEO of Rodda Construction, to the ConnectED Polk Advisory Board. Jason's leadership and passion for developing the future workforce will help strengthen our efforts to align education and industry across our community.

Additionally, we are excited to expand our network of strategic partners by welcoming UF/IFAS Books & Cooks and New Worlds Reading. Their commitment to literacy, family engagement, and lifelong learning helps build the foundational skills students need to succeed both academically and professionally.

This month's featured article highlights a growing national trend: students are seeking more than career awareness; they are seeking real-world experiences that provide direction, confidence, and purpose. The research validates what we continue to hear from both students and employers: internships, work-based learning, mentorship, and career-connected experiences are among the most impactful opportunities we can provide.

As we prepare for another year of growth and engagement, I want to thank our business, education, and community partners who continue to invest their time, talent, and resources into Polk County's future workforce. Together, we are creating opportunities that inspire students, strengthen talent pipelines, and build a stronger future for our community.



Thank you for being part of this important work.

With gratitude,

Dr. Melody Rider

IN FOCUS: MOMENTS THAT MATTER

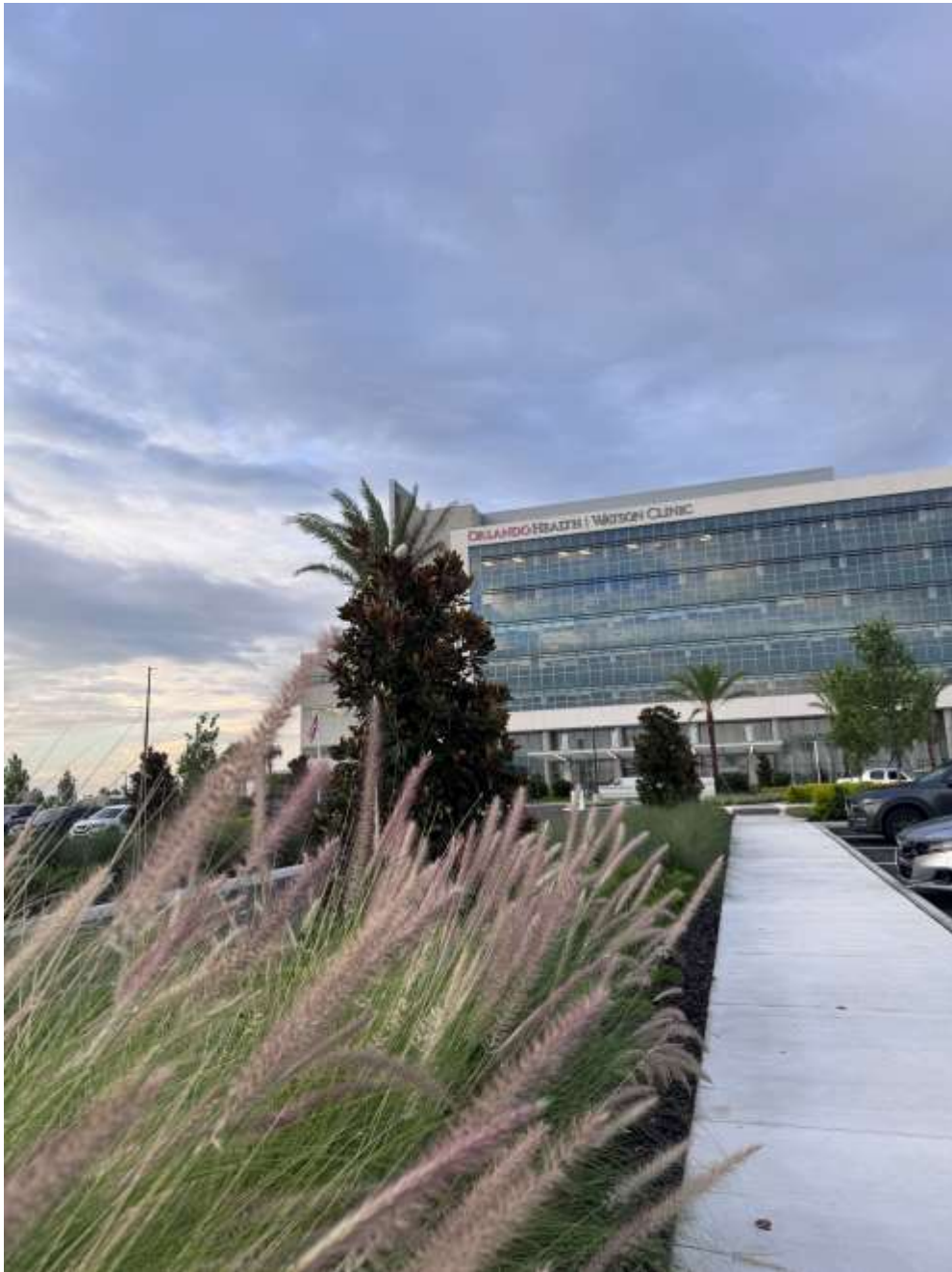


Construction Facts









Congratulations to [Orlando Health Mid-Florida](#)!

This milestone is a significant investment in the health and well-being of Polk County, bringing expanded access to exceptional care, innovative technology, and compassionate healthcare closer to home.

It is more than the opening of a new healthcare facility; it celebrates a shared commitment to building a healthier, stronger Polk County.

ConnectED Polk is proud to partner with **Orlando Health Mid Florida** and [Watson Clinic](#) to create meaningful career-connected learning opportunities that inspire the next generation of healthcare professionals. Together, we're helping students explore healthcare careers, gain real-world experiences, and build the workforce our community needs for the future.

Congratulations to the entire Orlando Health Mid Florida team, our partners at Watson Clinic, and everyone who made this incredible milestone possible.

We look forward to continuing this impactful partnership for years to come.

WELCOME NEW ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER



Jason Rodda | President, [Rodda Construction](#)

Founded in 1989 by John Rodda, with his brother Jodie there from the beginning, [Rodda Construction](#) is a family-owned firm based in Lakeland, Florida, serving clients across Central Florida.

What started as a hands-on family business has grown into a trusted construction company offering preconstruction, construction management, design/build, and general contracting services across education, healthcare, worship, multifamily, municipal, industrial, and commercial markets. In 2015, Jason Rodda took over as President and has continued to build on that foundation.

Jason is known for his hands-on leadership style and strong commitment to the community, and he continues to help lead Rodda Construction with a focus on quality service throughout Central Florida.

WELCOME NEW INVESTOR ADVOCATE



Savannah Rudolph | Social Media and Education Coordinator, [Visit Central Florida](#)

ConnectED Polk is proud to welcome [Visit Central Florida](#) as a new Investor Advocate and strategic partner in our mission to inspire and educate students on local career opportunities. As Polk County's official tourism and sports marketing organization, Visit Central Florida plays a vital role in strengthening one of the county's leading industries by promoting tourism, attracting

visitors, generating economic impact, and supporting workforce growth throughout the region. Tourism continues to create jobs, drive revenue, and enhance the quality of life for residents across Polk County.

Representing Visit Central Florida is **Savannah Rudolph, Social Media and Education Coordinator**, who leads the organization's educational outreach and training initiatives. Savannah oversees partnerships with educational institutions, co-hosts a credited tourism course at Southeastern University, and has helped adapt tourism curriculum opportunities for Polk County Public Schools. Her passion for connecting education with industry opportunities aligns perfectly with ConnectED Polk's commitment to helping students discover the diverse and rewarding careers available right here in Central Florida. We are excited to partner together to inspire the next generation of hospitality, tourism, marketing, and community leaders.

WELCOME NEW STRATEGIC PARTNERS



Denice Wright | Educator, [UF/IFAS Books & Cooks](#)

Denice Wright attended Florida State University and moved back to Polk County after graduating. She taught third grade for three years at Polk County Public Schools. She now works for UF/IFAS Books & Cooks, where she facilitates literacy and nutrition education with elementary families and does literacy-focused community outreach in partnership with New Worlds Reading.

[Books & Cooks](#) is a UF/IFAS Extension program that offers free family programming integrating literacy, parenting, and nutrition education. Participating families also receive books, family dinners, and fresh produce with family-friendly recipes. Polk County families can apply for one of the two sessions during the 26-27 school year:

In Haines City, for families with a child in K-5th grade

In Plant City/Southwest Lakeland for K-1st grade families

Deadline to apply is July 10th.

CONNECTED POLK NEWS AND UPDATES



Thank You, George W. Jenkins Fund within the GiveWell Community Foundation!

ConnectED Polk is honored to announce that the Viva Polk World Languages Integration Project, in collaboration with [Viva Polk Magazine](#), sponsored by ConnectED Polk and [Polk County Public Schools](#), has been selected for funding through the 2026 Impact Polk Grant Program. This generous award is made possible through the George W. Jenkins Fund within the GiveWell Community Foundation.

This investment represents a significant step forward in expanding language learning opportunities and global career awareness for students across Polk County. Through the Viva Polk World Languages Integration Project, students will gain greater access to engaging educational experiences that strengthen language proficiency, cultural understanding, and connections to real-world career pathways in an increasingly global economy.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the George W. Jenkins Fund and GiveWell Community Foundation for their commitment to educational innovation and student success. Their support empowers our community to create meaningful opportunities that prepare students to thrive in college, career, and life.



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/>



Internships & Work-Based Learning: The Future of Career Readiness is Here

A recent national survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center of 472 K-12 educators connected to Career and Technical Education (CTE) revealed a powerful trend: **work-based learning and internships are expected to be the fastest-growing career readiness opportunities over the next five years.**

According to the research, **77% of educators expect opportunities for work-based learning and internships to increase**, making it the top projected area of growth in CTE programming. Additionally, **75% anticipate growth in on-the-job career learning experiences**, while **75% expect expanded access to industry-recognized credentials** and **74% foresee increased dual-enrollment opportunities with colleges and universities.**

Why the Shift?

The data shows that educators are responding to growing demand from students, employers, and communities for experiences that connect classroom learning to real careers. Student interest in CTE has increased significantly, and local employers increasingly view career-connected learning as a solution to workforce talent gaps.

Today's students want more than career awareness—they want opportunities to explore careers firsthand, build professional skills, and make informed decisions about their futures before graduation.

What This Means for Polk County

At ConnectED Polk, this trend reflects exactly what we are hearing from both educators and industry partners. Employers continue to tell us they need a stronger talent pipeline, while students consistently express a desire for more hands-on experiences that help them understand career pathways.

Through initiatives such as:

Summer Internships through SchoolLinks

Career Conversations

Career Showcases

Academy Career Connections

Virtual and In-Person Field Trips

Work-Based Learning Experiences

The 90 Minutes in 90 Days Challenge

ConnectED Polk is helping bridge the gap between education and industry by creating meaningful opportunities for students to engage directly with employers.

The Opportunity Ahead

As schools expand work-based learning, internships, and career-connected experiences, the role of business partners becomes increasingly important. Whether hosting an intern, participating in a classroom discussion, providing

a facility tour, or mentoring a student, employers have an unprecedented opportunity to shape the future workforce.

The message from educators across the country is clear: **the future of career readiness is rooted in real-world experiences.**

Together, we can ensure that Polk County students graduate not only with knowledge, but with the confidence, skills, professional networks, and career awareness needed to thrive in the workforce and beyond.

Interested in helping inspire the next generation? Contact ConnectED Polk to learn how your organization can participate in work-based learning opportunities and help shape Polk County's future talent pipeline.

[https://www.cfdc.org/aviation-month-in-polk-county/Source: Education Week Research Center, \"Data-Driven and District Ready: What EdWeek Research Tells Us About the CTE Market,\" 2025 survey of 472 K-12 educators connected to Career and Technical Education programs.](https://www.cfdc.org/aviation-month-in-polk-county/Source: Education Week Research 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!

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