



End of School Year 2017-2018 Newsletter

From the Principal:

Dear Parents,

It is hard to fathom that today is the last day of school! The end of a school year is a time of reflection — for parents, teachers, and administrators. What were the mountaintops? Where were the valleys? What did we learn over the course of the year? This has certainly been a year of growth for Connections. We moved into a new building. We added a high school. We added over 38 new families and 20 staff. We were able to see tremendous growth in our students. We all know that our students teach us more than we can ever teach them!



Just a few of the amazing things we have done and accomplished:

* Great Family Nights * Book Fair * Raise the Roof * Draw the Line on Drowning
* Playground * Great Give * Light It Up Blue at Johnny Q's * Island Dolphin Care * Prom * Brightline
* Aquatics Program * Literacy Night * Miami Seaquarium * The Elks Club * Safety Patrol * School Store
* Graduation * Donors Choose Projects * Drum Circle

As we head into summer, I want to pause and give thanks and appreciation to our parents, staff, and to our community partners for your support, for your care, and for your trust. Together we have helped to continue growing our school community. I am both humbled and proud every day when I see the dedication and passion of each and every staff member at Connections. It is truly an exceptional place to work!

A special thanks to our PTO board and all our volunteers — you are always ready to “step up” and do whatever is needed. Additional tentacles of gratitude stretch out to those “*behind the scenes*” volunteers who contributed to all of our events.

During summer camp we will be having fun with art, water play, field trips and other fun activities.

There's no place we would rather be than in this school full of unique, unforgettable kids!!!

I look forward to the 2018-2019 school year and wish all of you a fantastic summer filled with family, friends, sun, water, and love.

Debi



Special Events

Last Day of School: June 1st

ESY:

Starts June 4th - Ends June 15th

Summer Camp Session One:

Begins June 18th

Open House:

Saturday August 11th 3:00-5:00

2018-2019 School Year:

Starts August 13th

Teaching Quote

You laugh, you cry, and you work harder than you ever thought you could. Somedays you're trying to change the world and somedays you're just trying to make it through the day. Your wallet is empty, your heart is full, and your mind is packed with memories of kids who have changed your life. Just another day in the classroom

Special Thanks

To all the parents that have:

- made a contribution to their child's classroom
- helped during special events
- donated funds
- Last but not least, thank you to all of our amazing **Parent Volunteers!** We appreciate your time and effort in supporting our school.

Re- Enrollment 2018-

Our classroom spaces for 2018-2019 School Year are filling up quickly. We have had many new applicants and anticipate full enrollment for the next school year. Please be sure that you have completed your "New and Returning Student" form by June 10th.

Enrollment packets will be available the first week of school via email, our website and on campus.

School Development

We are working tirelessly developing our programs, vocational training and building improvements. We added a playground this year and continue to fundraise for our new building plans.

Our Raise the Roof event was a great start to raising funds for the new building, the PTO did a wonderful job putting it all together.

Our swim program launch was a great success and the students are loving it!

Summer Camp

Summer is upon us!

Session 1: June 18th- July 6th

Week 1 June 18 - 22

Week 2 June 25 - 29

Week 3 July 2 - 6

Session 2: July 9th- July 27th

Week 4 July 9 - 13

Week 5 July 16 - 20

Week 6 July 23 - 27



Recreation Department- Ms. Katie

Throughout the course of the year students were exposed to numerous team sports and opportunities to enhance their gross motor skills. Some of the team sports included adapted versions of soccer, flag football, basketball, tee ball, kickball, and four square. Students were encouraged to socialize and interact with their peers while following directions, staying on task, or imitating movements. Schoolwide there is a visible difference in the students' ability to complete basic gross motor movements such as jumping jacks, touching their toes, crossing the midline, and balancing.

Aquatics:

At the beginning of the year, student's skill level ranged from developing swimming strokes to petrified of the water. The growth in each student over the last year is insurmountable. Most of them look forward to going to the pool and will happily engage in lessons and aquatic play. While all students progress at different paces, each one of them has made both observable and measureable strides in their skills.

Cooking:

The goal of the after school cooking program was to provide the participants an opportunity to try more well-balanced nutritious foods and teach them how to make meals. We were thrilled to see them try zucchini spaghetti, an oat based refined sugar free cookies, and even learn how to navigate and find ingredients at the supermarket.

Ms. Janine's Class



This school year started with six boys all new to Connections Education Center. We worked on all subjects such as academics, play, social skills, but our major concentration is on social play, independent functioning, and communication. They needed assistance with expressing their needs and wants appropriately, toileting and even learning to feed themselves.

Our schedule consists of circle time that enables them to learn appropriate sitting, participation in small groups, and concepts such as ABC's, colors, and theme vocabulary. Another focus is learning to transition to different centers with all staff.

We foster a sense of creativity with art, crafts and imaginative play with positive playmate interactions. At the playground, they have additional social opportunities with peers from other classes; jumping on the trampoline and chase are the favorites.

Currently, we are proud to say that almost all of our boys are toilet trained, feeding themselves, and friendships have been made. They have made great progress on their individual goals and are ready for the next year!

Ms. Tracey's Class

Our friends in pre-school/kindergarten have made much progress! We have friends who are now able to sit and participate in Morning Meeting, by singing, clapping and dancing.

We have budding artists who in August were not interested in crayons or markers now making beautiful art.

Several of our friends were very afraid of the water, now when we visit the pool they have fun learning to swim and playing with friends in the water.

Friendships were made, playing together became easier, and the transitions became easier.

My students that are graduating Pre-school are leaving with knowing their number, (1 student to 100!), knowing all their letters and their sounds. They know simple and some complex shapes as well as primary and secondary colors.

Much is left to learn, but it will be built on a solid foundation. We had an excellent school year!

Ms. Melissa C's Class

This year in kindergarten has been nothing but successful. We started off the year having difficulty with staying in designated areas, participating in small and large group activities, little to no functional communication, lack of social skills, playing with toys and behaviors.

These kids are able to stay in their designated areas, participate in large/small groups and work independently. These kids are also reading and communicating! They are expressing their needs and wants which has decreased their behaviors as well. They are starting to interact with each other and initiate play with each other. The students who did not play with toys are now exploring toys as well as playing with them. The students have grown with their independent skills. I have seen so much growth in these kids. I am so proud and can't wait to see them continue to grow.

Ms. Meilssa G's Class

When it comes to sitting down and processing an entire school year, it can prove to be a difficult task. I can analyze data from weekly collections and assessment, but that does not begin to show the amazing progress that was made in the classroom.

This school year began with 5 students that I had the pleasure of working with last school year and 3 students that were new to our classroom. Not to mention that we opened the doors to a beautiful new building, new furnishings, and new staff. When working with students on the Autism Spectrum, all of these wonderful "new" things instantly present "new" challenges. We hit the ground running to establish routines and get the students familiarized with all things "new". I am happy to say that it wasn't long before the students adjusted to all things "new".

Our class began the year with students having difficulty working in partners and small groups. Today, our classroom runs ONLY in 2 small groups. One group includes 5 students and the other group has 3 students. The group members vary depending on the skills being taught and/or maintained. We decided that our main goal was to teach new skills using a 1 teacher to 2 student ratio and quickly increase. This has tremendously helped the students to acknowledge each other's presence and turn to peers when needed. The academics have been running smoothly.

On the social aspect, our class has been known to be quite "loud". I wouldn't have it any other way!! The use of functional language has definitely increased. I must add that when a student asks if they can sit on the bus and tell knock, knock jokes to their friends, while traveling to an activity, we can say that we have been successful. Most the students came into this year with minimal play skills that included either solitary play or no play skills at all. We are now witnesses to reciprocal play, verbal exchanges, sharing, telling on one another, and turn taking while playing board games. We also have a group of 4 students who enjoy interacting on the same game on the iPad and having conversations while doing so. Success!!

As staff, we look at our class as an extension of our family. We make sure our students are attentive to their grooming, dress, and hygiene. Not exactly academic goals, but self-esteem goals, non-the less. We love the spontaneous singing and dancing that occurs and even when they get SO frustrated that they find the words, "Why are you so mean?" to express their dislike over having to stop playing and transition to a less preferred activity. We can instantly tell when a student walks in with a sly grin that they are going to "push the envelope" today and the opportunity to have verbal exchanges WILL happen. Potty training was a success and couldn't have been done without the follow through at home.

The P.E. program has been very beneficial to our students in that it has helped with following direction in a group format and helping the students to strengthen their bodies along with crossing their midlines. Our class cannot say enough about the swimming program. The skills they learned this year have been valuable and necessary for survival.

Ms. Maria's Class

The group of students I have are one of a kind. Each one of them is so special and unique. They all have different interests and hobbies. Some like to make music, while others color and draw. With this being my first year, the students and I have had to learn about each other. I learned about their behaviors and reinforces they prefer. On the other hand, the students had to learn about my teaching style and rules. These students have made tremendous progress on their goals. They are smart individuals who understand concepts and benefit from being challenged. The staff members in my class work extremely hard to encourage the students. My staff and I work hard to collaborate and communicate to ensure we are all on the same page. My staff offer their assistance to handle behaviors and class routines. I am very proud of my staff; we are a team. The classroom runs effectively between my eager students and my team.

Ms. Beth's Class

This year has been filled with growth both academically and socially for the students in Miss Beth's classroom. The class consisted of two 3rd graders, three 4th graders, five 5th graders, and one 6th grader. Several students have begun to add triple digits with carryover as well as multiplication and division. One of the students has improved two reading levels in this school year. It is a very verbal and social classroom and Miss Ashley (SLP) has been facilitating appropriate conversations. The kids have gone on many field trips including the Kravis Center, Island Dolphin Care, South Florida Fair, Lion Country Safari, and The Chocolate Spectrum. The students love to go swimming every week at Lake Lytal and are very disappointed when it is raining or too cold to go in the pool. Miss Beth was awarded the Go Teach! grant from the Education Foundation of Palm Beach County this fall. Her project was entitled "Counting Money with the Coin U Lator". This project helped her students to count money using a specialized calculator. Miss Beth also had 12 Donors Choose projects funded for the 2017 – 2018 school year totaling over \$8500. These materials included backpacks to bring to the pool, STEM activities, bikes and scooters for the playground, a new sandbox, basketball equipment, soccer equipment, a Nintendo switch and art supplies.



Ms. Mia's Class

Our year has been very exciting! We started the year with seven students in our class and ended with eight! Alan was a terrific addition to our class and one of the only students I've ever had that I must tell to stop reading! He is one of two students at academic grade level in our class. Alan is in 5th grade this year, as is Omari. We also have two students in 6th grade, two in 7th and two in eighth.

Teaching in the middle school classroom is highly differentiated, using a variety of blended learning tools. We use Raz-Kids to increase reading fluency and comprehension skills. One of our at-grade-level students completed all of the books in Raz-kids, so three times a week, she works with the other at-level reader in our class doing a literacy circle where they independently read a chapter at a time of Charlotte's Web, support each other to comprehend unfamiliar text, and complete reading response worksheets together. This requires the development of social and language skills. The other two days a week, they split up with one doing Raz –Kids and the other reading another piece of literature which she will complete a book report on. In addition, we started to use ASD Reading at the beginning of May as a trial for language arts instruction for next year. ASD Reading is a research based, systematic language arts program that, as its name implies, is specifically designed for students on the spectrum. We have seen terrific results in a very short period of time.

Morning work starts with Teach Town, which focuses on specific skills, individualized for each student. Cheyenne and Alan work on extra IXL and morning worksheets during this time. We all practice calendar and weather/temperature skills in the morning and different concepts that students, as a whole, may have difficulty with, or new concepts to learn. Some topics have been prepositional phrases, capitals of the US, synonyms, antonyms, same and different, to name a few.

We also use IXL Math with targeted math goals. The skills each student works on were defined through the IXL diagnostic at the beginning of the school year. Students also learn new math skills with our pencil to paper Basic Math curriculum. This is also differentiated. We obtained this program through our first Donors Choose project this year. Every student in our class benefits from this program.

Students do functional word skills using the Edmark Functional Words Series. This year we chose to work on grocery words. We took one trip to the grocery store to generalize our skills. We will be making more shopping lists and taking another trip to the grocery store in June. While most students work on Functional Skills, I target reading comprehension skills with our two at-grade-level students.

We also have drum circle twice a week led by Mr. Nick, our resident musician and art twice a week led by Ms. Jessica, our resident artist. We got the drums from our second Donors Choose project. What generous donors we had! In addition, we collect recycling and bring it to be recycled once a week. Finally, once a week we do 'Stretching with Reese' from the high school. He's an incredible leader, model and teacher!

Ms. Pam

The inaugural year for the Vocational and High School Program has been an eye opening adventure.

These young adults have traveled through the land of Expected and Unexpected Behaviors, the Wide World of the Social Senses, the Rules of Etiquette, Cooking 101, Music Appreciation, and Vocational Training.

Prom 2018 was a phenomenal success!

We have exciting plans for the upcoming year.

Mr. Scott

This year in Mr. Scott's High School Class we really improved recognition of expected and unexpected behavior.

We also had fun learning how to set a table, fold clothes and use a washing machine.



Occupational Therapy- Ms Patrikka

In Occupational Therapy, gains have been noticed with all students on my caseload with their participation, attention, and fine motor abilities.

Specifically, a third grader who struggles with dyspraxia and the inability to form letters on his own has demonstrated great gains with letter formation and able to write sentences now.

There are several pre-k students that initially transitioned poorly to new environments and did not accept age appropriate demands to be placed on them. Through the use of structured activity, sensory tools, and individualized attention, they can now transition and follow at least 60% of OT lead tasks of coloring, imitating, and just sitting for a designated time frame without behavioral outbursts.

Behavior Department

Dr. Kristin M. Kosmerl, BCBA-D, LBS, CAS (aka "Dr. K") is the board certified behavior analyst who has provided behavior services approximately four days a week throughout the school year.

Each student at Connections has an updated functional behavior assessment (FBA) and positive behavior support plan (PBSP), which is written by Dr. Kosmerl in conjunction with the teacher, classroom staff and speech and occupational therapists if applicable. These assessments and plans are individualized for each student.

Throughout the year, there has been training provided to all staff on the use of applied behavior analysis and verbal behavior techniques to be used in the classrooms to prevent negative behaviors. If negative behaviors are observed, staff has also been trained in how to quickly de-escalate behaviors without intermittently reinforcing the behaviors.

Parent trainings have been conducted twice this year focusing on prevention of negative behaviors and how to respond when negative behavior is observed in the home and community environment.

Behavior modification at Connections is a collaborative effort to meet the needs of every student in the educational environment. It has been a great school year!

Speech Department

Ms. Kelisha

Wow I can't believe the school year is coming to an end. The kids have worked very hard this year and have made gains individually. From participating in group sessions, transitioning from the classroom to speech, playing with peers, to requesting desired items. We have seen it all!

In August I met a sweet little girl who had no means of communication, difficulty sitting and showed no interest in participating during circle time or 1:1 language sessions. She also eloped frequently. To date, this sweet little girl not only enjoys coming to therapy but participates without boundaries. She is also showing emerging skills with requesting desired items using pictures in a field of 1 and exploring speech generating devices (SGD) with prompting.

Another little friend would verbally protest as well as scream and kick when it was time for "Speech" making each session challenging and unpredictable as this student did not do well with change within the session. To date, this little one is requesting to go to "Speech" on days when it is not his turn and PARTICIPATES! How cool is that!

Another one of my little friends was so extremely quiet and did not talk. This little one for the most part would ignore you or use gestures paired with vocalizations to request. As time went on, this little one started to mainly communicate with one adult in his class using single words and it wasn't the SLP. Needless to say this made our treatment sessions very difficult and we were both frustrated. I never gave up and continued to push him, which made him angry and would cause him to shut down even more. However, I think once he saw that I wasn't giving up and that talking to others met his needs and was also fun, something just clicked. This little guy will now talk to all the adults in his class including the SLP. He's making requests and sharing information. Oh and he's doing well with using more than one word to answer questions during treatment sessions. Just amazing!

Lastly I'd like to talk about how gains have been made in the area of social skills and play. A few friends that showed interest in solitary play have now begun to show interest in parallel play. Some have even made attempts to initiate verbal interactions with peer(s) during play after modeling from therapist and peers in real time and through video modeling. There has also been growth with children initiating greetings/farewells without models from adults or peers. It has truly been an amazing year of growth for which I am so proud of all of them!

Ms. Ashley

For speech and language therapy this year in Miss Beth's class, Ashley Romero, M.S., CCC-SLP, has focused on functional language skills. These skills better prepare the students not only for middle school, but for social and meaningful, life-long situations. Activities and goals were aimed to increase vocabulary, improve conversational skills, teach parts of speech and verb tenses to improve grammar, and enhance pragmatic skills by understanding the meaning of being a good friend and a polite listener.

In addition, some students have been working on articulation, answering a variety of questions, listening comprehension, recall, and word-finding skills. The students have made significant gains and have been observed using their new learned skills in their natural environment. It has been an exciting and rewarding year for the students in Miss Beth's class!



Speech Department

Ms. Marina

This school year is my first year joining the staff at Connections. The administration, teachers, teacher's assistants and therapists have been wonderful to get to know and have made me feel so welcome since my first day. It has been a great pleasure working with and getting to know the students I see for speech therapy. I have gotten to know their individual personalities and their potentials. At the end of each day, at least one child has put a smile on my face because they have made me proud.

With the PreK classroom I work with, I have seen a number of the students expand their vocabulary skills and improve in answering questions spoken to them. Two of the students have improved on making sound corrections to produce complete words and multi-syllable words correctly. Two other students have improved their abilities to follow through with classroom routines and structure, improve their on-task behavior in therapy sessions and apply skills in receptive language tasks.

With the elementary school classroom, I have seen improvements in on-task behaviors for certain students, and improvement in responding to questions and emerging conversational skills for two of the students in particular.

With the middle school classroom, I have seen a number of the students respond to each other, increase their interactional skills, and improve their own skills in responding to a range of questions and build on language comprehension with spoken and written language.

Ms. Beverly

We had a wonderfully successful year in all things language and communication this year in the high school and transition classes! Social groups were a highlight for me, and I was delighted that all of the students showed growth in learning about themselves and others.

Targeted skills included learning about the Social Sense, "expected" and "unexpected" behaviors, Just Me vs. Thinking of You mindsets, and driving home the point that other people have different thoughts and feelings than your own. All staff in high school and transition classes reinforced these concepts daily, and the growth that was seen was amazing!

As I think forward to next year, I truly believe that continued focus on developing social awareness and insight about themselves and others will continue to benefit this exceptional group of young people.

