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School Connect Names Kendra Smiley as New Executive Director, Ushering in Next Chapter of Growth

The experienced education and community engagement leader will work to expand the organization's impact and help bridge the gap between early childhood and K-12 education across Arizona.



PHOENIX, Ariz. (November 16, 2026) – School Connect, an Arizona nonprofit dedicated to building community partnerships that help students and families thrive, has named Kendra Smiley as its next Executive Director. Smiley will succeed Founder Tracey Beal, who is retiring in early 2027 after more than a decade of building and growing the organization.

The transition marks an exciting new chapter for School Connect, which brings together schools, businesses, faith-based organizations, nonprofits and community members to create a network of support around students, educators and families.

Smiley brings extensive experience in early childhood education, family engagement and statewide community partnerships. Her career includes leadership roles at Southwest Human Development, First Things First and the National Center for Families, where she led a statewide federal grant initiative for five years, working with school districts and community partners to strengthen support for young children and families.

“I have been passionate about this work from the very first day I learned about the impact and the village that School Connect creates around schools,” said Smiley. “I think what School Connect does – bringing people together to create an ecosystem around a school and help ensure all children have the opportunity to succeed – is incredibly important. I am excited to step into this role, continue this amazing work and find new ways to expand its impact.”

Looking ahead, Smiley sees an opportunity to strengthen connections between early childhood providers and the K-12 education system, bringing childcare centers, family resource centers, friend and neighbor care providers, and other community resources into the networks surrounding schools.

The vision builds on the foundation Beal established when she founded School Connect in 2014 after recognizing the potential for schools to serve as natural gathering spaces where communities could come together to address the broader needs of children and families.

“The thing I love about School Connect, and why the model works, is that there is actually treasure and gold everywhere in a community – we just don't know about each other. We're kind of siloed off from one another,” said Beal. “However, when you bring everyone to one table and they're able to bring their hopes, their dreams, their talents and their resources, everybody is doing something significant to make a difference.”

Smiley and Beal will work together through February, at which time she will be introduced to the School Connect community during the 2027 School Connect Summit. Tracey Beal will then officially retire in March, after which point she will stay connected through volunteering.

As she prepares to pass the torch, Beal believes Smiley's experience and vision will help take the organization to new heights.

“I feel like we have created a beautiful foundation, but we have so much further to go,” said Beal. “I am thrilled that we get to have Kendra Smiley, who embodies in her life and her heart the same heart I have. As a founder, I really believe that the greatest legacy is handing something to someone and allowing them to use their own gifts, vision and creativity to create even more.”

With an established network of community partners and new opportunities to connect early childhood and K-12 resources, School Connect is looking forward to expanding its reach and deepening its impact across Arizona.

About School Connect

School Connect is an Arizona nonprofit that empowers schools to build lasting community partnerships that ignite every student's potential. Through its collaborative model, School Connect brings together schools, families, businesses, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, government agencies and community members to create a village of support around students, educators and families. Learn more at www.schoolconnectaz.org.

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