



Summer 2026 • A Thought Partner Publication



FCSN Connections

Engage • Educate • Empower

• From the Newsroom

Newsline, reimagined. A thought partner for ideas, honest questions, and the real experiences of our community.

• The Federal Shift

What is changing for families — and the rights in Massachusetts that have not changed at all.

• Together We Thrive

Save the date for the 2026 Gala — a Denim & Diamonds celebration on October 17.

Federation for Children with Special Needs



FCSN.ORG

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“To meet families where they are — not just with information, but with insight, connection, and partnership.”

FROM THE NEWSROOM

A New Chapter, The Same Commitment: FCSN Connection

By Loryn Cohen, Director of Development & Communications

Welcome to FCSN Connections — the publication you have known as Newline, reimagined. The name is new, but the commitment behind it is the same one that has guided FCSN for more than fifty years: to stand beside families, share what we are learning, and make hard things a little easier to navigate together.

What is new is the spirit of the publication. Connections is built to be a **thought partner** — a space not only for updates, but for ideas, honest questions, and the real experiences of our community. In these pages, you will find policy you can act on, stories that remind us we are not alone, and practical tools you can use today.

"A space not only for information, but for reflection, storytelling, and forward-thinking conversation."



FCSN Connections

A Thought Partner Publication

WHAT'S NEW

We are reimagining the publication around four sections — Updates & Industry News, Family & Youth, Tools & Events, and Professional Development & SEPACs — with deeper features, real family voices, and practical takeaways.



Thank you for reading, and for being part of this community. This is the beginning of a new chapter — and we are building it together.

— The FCSN Communications & Marketing Team

IN THIS EDITION

Policy you can act on, stories that remind us we are not alone, and practical tools you can use today — across families, youth, events, and the professionals who walk beside them.

Executive Director's Brief

Strengthening Systems Through Partnership, Advocacy & Impact

By Patricia Nellius, Executive Director

In a year marked by shifting fiscal priorities and evolving policy conversations, FCSN remains grounded in a simple truth: families thrive when systems work with them, not around them.

What makes this work possible is the strong, collaborative relationships we share with our community partners, funders, and state agencies. These partnerships are built on shared values: equity, access, and the belief that families deserve clear information and meaningful participation in decisions affecting their children. Together, we are strengthening the systems that support children with disabilities across Massachusetts.

As the policy landscape continues to evolve, families are seeking clarity on how legislative proposals, budget decisions, and regulatory updates may influence evaluations, specialized instruction, multilingual access, behavioral supports, and transition planning. Our role is to ensure families have the tools to navigate these changes with confidence — and to ensure their lived experiences inform the decisions being made at every level.



Patricia Nellius
Executive Director, FCSN

Our Mission In Practice

With the support of our funders and partners, FCSN continues to deliver high-impact services that meet the needs of families statewide — grounded in current law, offered in many languages, and shaped by family voice.

“Our mission: empower families, engage diverse communities, and eliminate barriers to improve life outcomes for all children and young adults, especially those with disabilities.”

High-Impact Services

Information & Referral

Individualized guidance on special education rights, early intervention, transition planning, and system navigation.

Multilingual Engagement

Partnerships with cultural organizations ensure families who speak other languages have equitable access to advocacy tools.

Training & Workshops

Multilingual trainings on IEP development, procedural safeguards, disability rights, transition, and behavioral supports.

Policy & Systems Advocacy

Collaborating with agencies, coalitions, and policymakers so family perspectives shape decisions.

Measurable & Meaningful Impact

This year, our work reached families across the Commonwealth



Families reported increased confidence in navigating IEP meetings, understanding their rights, and advocating for appropriate services. Our policy engagement helped ensure that the family voice was represented in statewide conversations on disability equity, multilingual access, and special education protections.

Partnerships with schools, agencies, and community organizations expanded our reach and strengthened the systems families rely on. These outcomes reflect a shared commitment between FCSN, our funders, and our partners to building a more equitable, accessible, and family-centered landscape for children with disabilities.

As we move forward, we remain committed to collaboration, transparency, and advocacy rooted in lived experience.

1,000s

Families receive direct one-to-one support through our help line and programs.

10,000+

Individuals participated in workshops, trainings, and community events.

50+ yrs

Standing beside Massachusetts families through change and transition.

The Bottom Line

Together, we can ensure that every child's potential is recognized, supported, and celebrated.

Recent Appointments

Welcoming New Leaders Across Massachusetts

By Loryn Cohen, Director of Development & Communications

As leaders across Massachusetts step into pivotal new roles, FCSN is proud to welcome and congratulate these notable appointments.



Secretary of Education

Dr. Stephen Zrike Jr.

Governor Maura Healey announced the appointment of Dr. Stephen Zrike Jr. as Secretary of Education. Dr. Zrike is currently Superintendent at Salem Public Schools and previously led the Holyoke and Wakefield Public Schools. Current Secretary Patrick Tutwiler steps down on February 13 to become President and CEO of Walker Therapeutic & Educational Programs.



Child Advocate for Massachusetts

Marisol Garcia

Selected by Governor Healey, Attorney General Andrea Joy Campbell, and State Auditor Diana DiZogio, Marisol Garcia brings more than 30 years of experience advocating for children and families — including two decades representing children in court and a decade of executive leadership in child welfare and behavioral health policy. She begins her five-year term on June 1, succeeding Maria Mossaides.

A Heartfelt Welcome

To both leaders: your work reflects values we share at FCSN — to elevate the voices of children, youth, and families across Massachusetts, especially those most vulnerable, and to build systems that truly meet their needs.





Preserve Assets | Protect Benefits | Live Well
of Massachusetts & Rhode Island

“More than a financial tool, a Special Needs Trust provides peace of mind for today and protection for tomorrow.”

Protecting Benefits. Preserving Independence.

When a loved one has a disability, planning ahead can feel overwhelming. A **Special Needs Trust** helps preserve eligibility for essential public benefits like SSI and Medicaid— while providing funds to support a person’s unique needs, goals, and quality of life.

50+ Years of Trust

Helping families create secure, sustainable futures through professional trustee services and expert Special Needs Trust administration.

A Dedicated Coordinator

Every beneficiary is paired with a licensed social worker who understands the journey — offering guidance, advocacy, and resource coordination.

Person-Centered

A nonprofit serving individuals with all disabilities — promoting dignity, independence, and an enhanced quality of life.



Ready to Learn More?
Schedule a **FREE** 30-minute consultation

Discover how a Special Needs Trust can safeguard your loved one’s future.

| [Schedule your free consultation with a PLAN specialist today.](#)

Policy & Your Family

A Message from Our Executive Director on the U.S. Department of Education Announcement

By Patricia Nellius, Executive Director

The Federation for Children with Special Needs is closely monitoring the announcement by the U.S. Department of Education regarding new interagency agreements with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice. These agreements would shift day-to-day responsibilities related to special education and rehabilitative services, as well as civil rights enforcement and student privacy, across federal agencies.

For over 50 years, federal special education law has promised children with disabilities the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education in the least restrictive environment. Families depend on clear federal leadership, specialized expertise, transparent guidance, and strong enforcement to make those rights real in classrooms and communities. Any restructuring of federal responsibilities must not weaken the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504, the Americans with Disabilities Act, civil rights protections, or the ability of families to access timely support and remedies.

We are deeply concerned about the uncertainty this announcement creates for children with disabilities, their families, educators, and the organizations that support them. The expertise housed within the Office of Special Education (OSEP) and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is essential to ensuring that students' educational and civil rights are understood, protected, and enforced. Families should not experience disruption, confusion, or additional barriers when seeking services, filing complaints, or advocating for their children.

The Federation calls on federal leaders to provide immediate clarity about how these agreements will be implemented; preserve the authority, funding, staffing, and expertise needed to uphold IDEA and civil rights laws; maintain accessible pathways for families to receive technical assistance and resolve complaints; and ensure that every child with a disability continues to receive the protections and supports guaranteed under federal law. We will continue to review available information, work with partners, and advocate for children and families at every level.



Stay Connected

Read the federal announcement referenced in this statement:

[U.S. Department of Education Announces Additional Partnerships to Strengthen Coordination for Individuals with Disabilities Programs and Bolster Civil Rights](#)



Planning Ahead, Together

By Aceriane Leal, Director of Outreach and Engagement

Planning for the future is not a single conversation. It is a journey that begins early and unfolds over many years — one that families do not have to take alone.

This summer, FCSN is highlighting two ways we help families look ahead with confidence: by starting the conversation early in middle school, and by going deeper through new Transition Clinics for older students and young adults.

Starting Early: Middle School Is a Great Time to Explore

For many families, middle school can feel like a bridge between childhood and the possibilities ahead. It is an ideal time to begin learning about future pathways — the educational, career, and community opportunities available as students prepare for high school and beyond. Starting these conversations early gives students and families more time to discover interests, identify strengths, ask questions, and learn about supports. Middle school is not about having all the answers — it is an opportunity to begin exploring possibilities and building confidence for the next steps.

HERE TO HELP, EVERY STEP

Whether families are exploring high school options, Career Technical Education (CTE) pathways, transition planning, or educational supports, our multilingual coordinators share resources, answer questions, and connect families to community supports for children and youth of all ages.

“Every family's journey is unique, but one thing remains true: the best plans are built together. Early conversations create the foundation for future opportunities and success.”



In Partnership with Autism Housing Pathways

Going Deeper: AHP Transition Clinics for Ages 14 and Up

By Andria Entsminger, Coordinator, Individual Assistance / Autism Housing Pathways

Building on that early foundation, FCSN and AHP are launching virtual Transition Clinics to help families navigate the path from school to adult life — from community-based supports to higher education, employment, and independent living.

14–18

Building the Foundation

Identifying needs, building skills, and planning for successful adult outcomes.

18–22

Exploring What's Next

Transition services, post secondary goals, benefits, and life after high school.

22+

Adult Life & Beyond

Adult services, housing, employment, community supports, and long-term planning.

Each 90-minute clinic is tailored to the family's priorities and informed by the student's IEP, transition evaluations, and current concerns. Common topics include transition assessments, person-centered planning, guardianship and supported decision-making, government benefits, housing options, and parent training. Students are encouraged to attend all or part of the session so they can help shape their future. Clinics are offered virtually via Zoom and include follow-up notes, a summary of next steps, and links to resources.

Clinic Details

Cost: \$125 — scholarships available if needed. 90 minutes, via Zoom, with written follow-up. Space is limited.

Ready to Begin?

Complete the FCSN intake form or contact the Individual Assistance Center at (800) 331-0688.



A Meaningful Opportunity

These new clinics offer expert guidance at a critical time in the transition journey — for families of students and young adults with a wide range of goals.

A Family Reflection

Pediatric Palliative Care Family Engagement & Leadership Coordinator

By Ana Burke, Coordinator, Pediatric Palliative Care Family Engagement & Leadership



When I first heard the words “palliative care,” I immediately thought it meant end-of-life or hospice care. I think a lot of families do. To me, it felt scary — almost like accepting that there was no hope left.

Looking back, I realize how much I misunderstood what palliative care actually is. Pediatric palliative care is about improving quality of life for children with life-limiting illnesses and supporting the whole family. It can happen at the same time as treatments, therapies, and hospital care. It is not about giving up — it is about adding support. In Massachusetts, it is state-funded and available at no cost for families who qualify.

Many families “graduate” from palliative care as their child’s health stabilizes or improves. It is not always a lifelong service, and it does not automatically mean the end of life. For many families, it simply provides support during the hardest and most medically complex periods.

My daughter passed away last year, and one thing I carry with me is wishing we had accepted palliative care support earlier—not only for the music and art therapy, nursing support, social workers, child life specialists, and simply having people around us who understood what life with medical complexity really felt like, but also because we would have had an established team who knew us, understood our daughter’s needs, and was ready to support us as the inevitable happened.

I wanted to share this because I know there are families who hear the term and feel immediate fear, just like I did. If that is you, I hope you will ask questions and learn more about what pediatric palliative care really is.

What it Offers

Music and art therapy, nursing support, social workers, child life specialists, family events — and connection to a community of families who understand.

Good to Know

In Massachusetts, pediatric palliative care is state-funded and available at **no cost** for families who qualify — alongside ongoing treatment.

“It is not about losing hope. Sometimes it is about making more room for support, connection, comfort, and quality of life.”

Navigating Information

Trusting the Tools: Families, AI & Social Media

By Wendi Hoffer, Family Engagement Specialist

At 2a.m., a parent sits at the kitchen table with their child's appointment letter in one hand and their phone in the other. They Google the diagnosis, scroll parent forums, ask ChatGPT. By morning, they've read fifteen perspectives — some contradictory, some terrifying.

This moment is increasingly common. Social media and AI have become part of how we parent — connecting us to communities we couldn't find before, while also risking misinformation that pulls us away from the professionals who know our children best. The question isn't whether to use these tools. It's: **how do we use them wisely?**

What These Tools Do Well

Social media connects families who couldn't find each other before. If your child has a rare condition, online you can find hundreds of parents navigating the same complexity. AI can give you information quickly when you can't wait until the next appointment. That connection and accessibility are real and valuable.

What These Tools Get Wrong

Social media amplifies the dramatic, not the typical. And AI can deliver confident-sounding answers that are wrong — authoritatively, without pausing to ask questions.

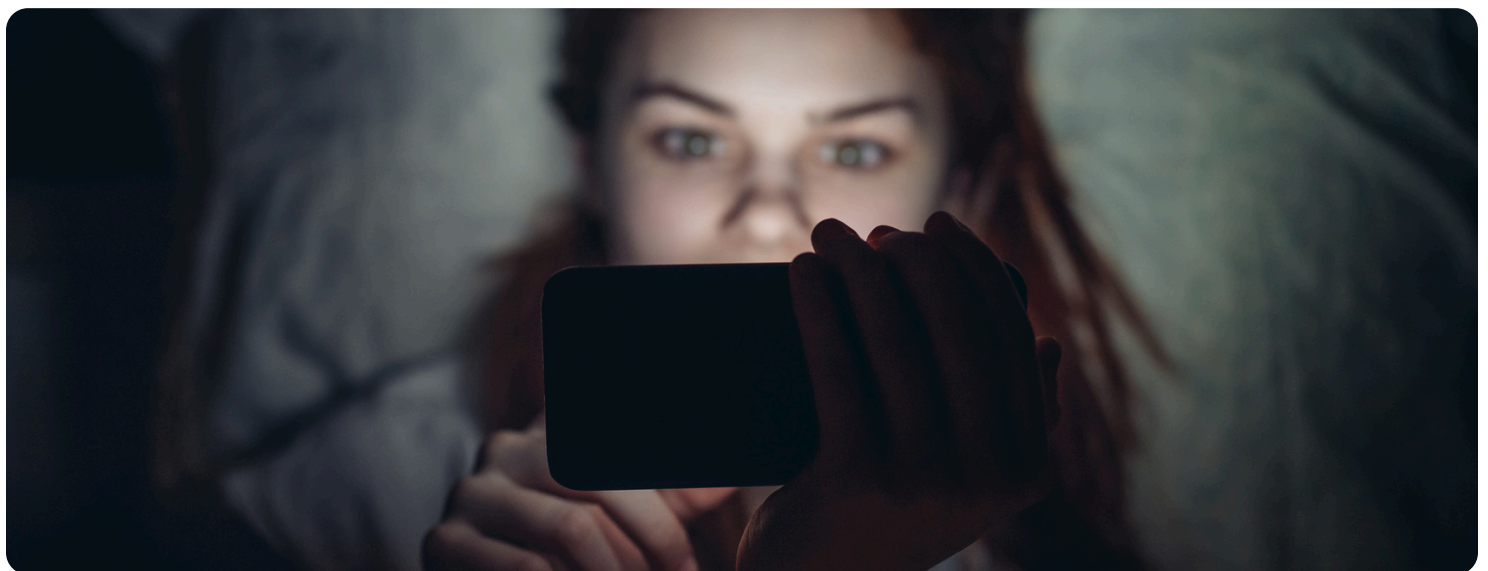
≈ 50%

Of popular AI chatbot responses to health questions are problematic — and 1 in 5 of those wrong answers are dangerous enough to cause real harm.

“Used with purpose, social media can help parents find trusted resources, meaningful connections, and the confidence that comes from learning alongside others on a similar journey.”

Up to 56%

Misinformation rate across 5,000+ social posts on autism, ADHD & mental health — highest on TikTok.



A CAUTIONARY NOTE

In one study, researchers planted a fabricated condition online — including a paper that literally said “this entire paper is made up” — and within weeks, AI chatbots were citing it as real.



“The families doing this best aren’t rejecting online tools. They’re using them as a starting point, not an ending point.”

Using These Tools Wisely

Tools that connect us, professionals who listen, families, empowered to decide.

By Meghan Chapman

Know what each tool is good for

Peer groups are excellent for lived experience and emotional support — not for medical diagnoses. AI is good for quick information, not final decisions.

Ask first, then verify

Bring what you find to your child’s doctor or a trusted education professional: “I found this. Can you help me understand what it means for my child?”

Trust your instincts, but verify decisions

Your concern is valid. Searches can help you gather information — then seek a second opinion, a referral, or FCSN’s Help Line.

Remember you’re seeing a slice

Online communities are valuable and incomplete — the quieter stories often go unposted.

Where This Information Comes From

BMJ Open (Apr 2026): ~50% of AI responses problematic, ~20% highly so.

Mass General Brigham / JAMA Network Open (Apr 2026): AI collapses prematurely into single answers — wrong 80% of the time on limited-information cases.

For Help

To understand healthcare decisions, educational rights, and complex care, contact FCSN’s Help Line at 1-800-331-0688. Our staff speak multiple languages and are here to support you.

Stronger Together

“I Didn’t Know I Was Allowed to Ask That”

Featuring the Tricca family

For years, Pamela Tricca did what so many parents do: she took things one step at a time. When her son Matty was young, there were signs he might need additional support — vision concerns, speech delays, later tics, a seizure, and a growing list of evaluations.

Despite years of navigating special education, Pamela never learned about FCSN. That changed when a local parent leader introduced her through a workshop. Suddenly, there were resources, trainings, and people who could help her understand not only her son’s rights, but her own role as an advocate.

“FCSN empowered me to be an advocate — not just someone attending meetings, but someone who understood how to ask questions and participate in decisions.”



For Matty, school was often challenging. “There were a lot of times when I felt like an outsider,” he says. A turning point came when he attended his first FCSN event and met other young people with experiences like his own. “When I got home, I realized something — these people were just like me.”

Today, Matty serves on the FCSN’s Youth Advisory Board, presents at conferences, and helps shape programs for other young people. “I’d like to be a public speaker,” he says. “I want to connect with different communities, educate people, and remind them that everyone matters.”

Why Recipricol Support Transforms Caregiving

Finding Belonging and Building Your Village

By Mahima Gupta, Juliana Robert, and Valeryia Pedersen

Connection sits at the heart of FCSN's family support work. When we have strong bonds with others, we handle stress better, feel less lonely, and become more resilient.

Sometimes the most meaningful support comes from simply talking to someone who understands. Raising a child with specialized support needs can feel overwhelming, and many families experience stress, isolation, or uncertainty. Sharing experiences with other parents who have faced similar ups and downs brings comfort, encouragement, and a reminder that we are not alone.

These relationships often become a two-way source of support: families learn from one another, share ideas and resources, and lift each other through both difficult moments and celebrations.

Parent to Parent (P2P)

Connects caregivers with trained support parents who understand the journey firsthand.

Caregiver to Caregiver (C2C)

Helps families build supportive relationships around caregiving and respite needs.

Get In Touch

fcsn.org 617-236-7210

info@fcsn.org

“Many felt overwhelmed and burnt out — and through access to support, found strength and resilience.”



Start Building Your Village

Email p2p@fcsn.org with questions about Parent to Parent, or c2crespite@fcsn.org about the Caregiver to Caregiver Respite Network.



Federation for Children with Special Needs

Together We Thrive

A Night of Impact, Denim & Diamonds

SAVE THE DATE

2026 Gala

Join us for a joyful evening centered on community, hope, and the children and families at the heart of FCSN's mission. A *Denim & Diamonds* celebration honoring the resilience of families and the caring community that stands beside them.



Venue

Newton Marriott

Date

Saturday, October 17, 2026

Time

6:00 – 11:00 pm

FCSN.ORG/GALA2026

• Formal Invitation to Follow • FCSN Connections – Summer 2026

Connecting Youth Through Shared Experiences

I've Been There!

Last virtual session on June 30th

By Meghan Chapman, Officer, Transition to Adult Life Projects

This spring, FCSN's Transition Projects team launched I've Been There!, a virtual series designed by and for young people with disabilities, creating a welcoming space to connect and have honest conversations about the transition to adulthood.

Held on the last Tuesday of each month, it explores life after high school, college, and vocational programs, employment, independent living, and self-advocacy — featuring current and former members of FCSN's Youth Advisory Board sharing personal experiences and advice.

Planning A Life (PAL): College & Beyond

Come Explore College and Beyond

In-person Youth and Family event on July 25th

By Meghan Chapman, Officer, Transition to Adult Life Projects

A one-day event for young people with disabilities ages 16–21 and the families who support them, a welcoming space to learn about postsecondary opportunities, and imagine life after high school. One of the most important messages: there is no single “right” path. Participants will learn about:

- College pathways & transition support programs for students with disabilities
- MAIPSE, (free) community college and four-year college options
- Resources that support independence and self-advocacy

Stay Connected

Our popular social chats for youth led by youth continues in the Fall. Sign up now for the Connecting YOUTh series in the fall.

Follow **#TransitionTuesday** and **#WorkforceWednesday** on Facebook.

PAL: College & Beyond

Date
Sat, July 25,
2026

Time
10:00 am –
2:30 pm

Location
Schrafft's Center, Charlestown, MA

Young Adults (own gaurdian)	\$25
Caregiver/Families	\$25
Professionals	\$75

Registration is Now Open

Space is limited. Scholarships and discounts available — contact transition@fcsn.org.
PAL is not a drop-off event; caregivers of youth who are not their own guardians must remain on-site.



From the Visions of Community Conference

Building Better Partnerships Starts with Listening

By Loryn Cohen, Director of Development & Communications

At this year's Visions of Community Conference, keynote speaker Dr. Christina Cipriano challenged attendees to think differently about how change happens: meaningful change requires us to stop accepting barriers as “just the way things are” and start asking how we can do better.

Every day, families navigate systems that can be complicated and overwhelming. While educators and professionals bring valuable expertise, families bring something equally important: a deep understanding of their child. Strong partnerships begin when that expertise is recognized and valued.

One of the most important ingredients is trust. Trust grows when families feel welcomed, heard, and respected — when professionals take time to listen before making assumptions, and when conversations focus on understanding rather than moving through an agenda. Communication matters too. Providing interpretation, translated materials, and clear communication helps ensure every family can engage fully in conversations about their child's future.

“Building strong partnerships does not require perfect circumstances. It starts with recognizing families as essential members of the team — one conversation at a time.”

What Builds Partnerships

Recognize family expertise. Lead with trust. Listen with intention. Create real opportunities for participation — and communicate in ways every family can access.





Inclusive Leadership Academy

FCSN Launches the Inclusive Leadership Academy

By Rebecca Davis, Project Officer

This spring, FCSN launched the first cohort of the Inclusive Leadership Academy (ILA) — a DESE-funded program designed to prepare school and district leaders to champion Inclusive Education in their communities.

65 hrs

Blended professional learning, aligned to DESE's 2026 strategic priorities.

27

School and district leaders in the first cohort.

26

Districts represented across the Commonwealth.

8

Virtual instructional modules, plus a hybrid Capstone Studio.

Core topics included the Foundations of Inclusive Leadership, Legal and Ethical Foundations, Data Informed Leadership, IEPs as Learning Spaces, Inclusive Instruction and UDL, and Collaboration with Family and School Teams. Delivered on Saturday mornings from February to May, the program closed with an in-person Capstone Studio at the FCSN office on May 9. Participants — principals and assistant principals, IEP team leads, 504 coordinators, special education directors, and teachers — each identified a Problem of Practice and developed an Inclusive Leadership Plan to address it, with coaching from Dr. Joe Petner, a public educator for over 40 years and retired principal of the Haggerty School in Cambridge. The next Inclusive Leadership Academy will be an in-person, weeklong Summer Intensive from July 20 – 24th at Fitchburg State University.

Let's Talk Inclusion

A monthly 4-part virtual series featured spring speakers:

Nora Hassan — BPS special educator & ESL teacher

Eileen Hagerty — attorney in special education law

Dr. Bill Henderson — retired principal, Dr. William W. Henderson Inclusion School

Shamieh Wall — parent advocate

Looking Ahead

The ILA equips leaders to turn inclusive vision into practice — strengthening the systems that serve every student.



FCSN Connections

FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A Thought Partner Publication · Engage. Educate. Empower.



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