



Background

I launched Next Steps Educational Consulting in July 2023. I've worked with over 1,500 families in the past 15 years, and now with Next Steps Educational Consulting, my goal is to help families of children with special needs prepare for their independence. Such as from helping parents figure out the right schools for their children to planning post-high school transitions—whether that's college, careers, or life skills.

I worked for over 10 years in a nonprofit organization, helping parents with children who have special needs. During my time there, I held various roles. I started as an education and support specialist, then transitioned into a transition manager role, where I worked more closely with high school-aged students. Eventually, I became the advocacy and training manager, training the team on everything I had learned.

Personally, I have two neurodivergent daughters. My oldest daughter, who has autism, recently graduated with her master's degree in violin performance. My younger daughter, who has ADHD and is also gifted, graduated summa cum laude with a degree in psychology. Advocating for my daughters taught me a lot about special education, and I wanted to use that experience to help other families.

The mission of my business is to empower families with knowledge, advocacy, and results. If you've ever had a family member or friend with a disability, you know how challenging it can be for parents to navigate the public school system and understand their rights. This is why I started my business—to help parents through this journey.

Solution

The Florida SBDC at FIU under the BizGap Program trainings have been amazing. I attended sessions on business planning, marketing strategy, social media marketing, email marketing, and even Google Business Profile setup. These were all the key pillars I didn't have when I first started. The BizGap project in FL-27 is funded by a grant from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) and designed to provide another "tool in the toolkit" for communities looking to better assist their businesses with startup assistance and business growth.

For example, I worked with business consultant Michelle Caba, who specializes in Branding and Marketing Strategy, and helped me improve my digital marketing. She pointed out areas that weren't aligning with my business goals and guided me through making it better. Today, I'm receiving inquiries through my website, something that wasn't happening before.

The social media marketing training was also a big help provided by business consultant Emily de Armas. I've grown my Instagram and Facebook presence and now have over 400 followers. I've also started using Fiverr to hire affordable help for things like website improvements and design work. While I don't have a large budget, I've managed to make small investments that have made a big difference.

I've also been connecting with the community. For example, I partnered with a local attorney to host a training on guardianship, and I was thrilled when 12 people attended! I've also been invited to do a YouTube interview with a colleague who works with special needs parents, which helped me gain referrals.

Another big step was creating postcards to distribute at conferences. In January, my postcards were included in welcome bags at the University of Miami's autism conference in Orlando, which I hope will bring more clients. Additionally, I've been reaching out to speech and behavior therapists as referral sources.

Overall, I feel much more organized and motivated because of the BizGap trainings and specialized consulting. It's overwhelming to do everything on your own, but the tools and strategies I've learned have given me the structure I needed to grow.

From the Owner:

My biggest advice is to find an organization like Florida SBDC at FIU under BizGap Program that offers support and training. It's so important to learn from professionals and connect with other entrepreneurs, even if they are at various stages of their journey. Networking can provide encouragement and inspiration.

Also, don't try to do everything alone. It can feel isolated when you're running a business by yourself, but reaching out for help—whether from organizations, mentors, or friends—can make a dramatic difference. Technology today is advancing quickly, and it can be overwhelming, especially for older entrepreneurs like me. But with the right resources and people to guide you, you can keep up and stay motivated.

Finally, remember that it takes time. Success doesn't happen overnight, so stay consistent, keep learning, and don't give up.

Business Owner Name: Sandra Rancano

Company Name: Next Steps Educational Consulting

Location: Kendall, FL