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## Involving Older Adults in Schools

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# Involving Older Adults in Schools

## Is It Spreading Wisdom or Making More Work?

By Jane Angelis  
and Lisa Wathen

Older adults possess what many young people lack: history, patience, and a deep knowledge of the human struggle. At a time when flexibility and the ability to change are essential skills for entry into the economy, senior citizens can show the way. They were born, after all, before television, jet planes, and communications satellites. And in an age in which mobility, poverty, and other forces have severed family ties, older adults are a living link with the past.

With all the benefits that can accrue from involving older people in our schools, it would seem to make sense that this type of activity be a key element of educational restructuring. But although every state has some kind of intergenerational programming, none has a systematic plan to include older adults as a formal element of school reform.

Why not? Inertia can prevent teachers from changing the traditional way of educating. And, more importantly, most communities have no systems to connect older adults with schools.

Yet no less an authority than the U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, has stressed the benefits of intergenerational programs, saying recently that "this connecting of parents and grandparents, of older people who are looked on as mentors, is extremely important to education, and is just as important to the older generations participating." Moreover, he and others note the political force older persons who are connected participants in the schools can exert in helping advance bond referendums and other issues important to the schools.

An intergenerational initiative aimed at using the talents and knowledge of the old to augment the learning of the young would represent a true "win-win" proposition. But three critical questions must be addressed before this kind of movement will be accepted as an integral component of restructuring:

- How can schools involve older adults in a way that leads to a permanent mechanism for intergenerational ventures?
- How can schools maximize the involvement of older adults so that programs are meaningful and make an impact?
- How can educators reach an understanding that intergenerational programs are the next logical step in educational reform?

The rapid growth of intergenerational programs over the last decade has been one of the most beneficial accomplishments in school reform. We must be careful, however, to see that intergenerational-program development is planned so that it can become a permanent mechanism—part of what one educator has called an "intergenerational infrastructure."

Where do we find the blueprint for an intergenerational infrastructure? History offers some answers. In the early days of our country, informal helping systems were needed for survival. Education included everyone, older adults taught young people their skills, and little ones learned by doing chores, taking responsibility, and coming to the realization that they were important links to the survival of the family and community. We may never return to those



days, but clearly, in light of the pervasive problems in education, we must make changes.

How do we begin? Most of the existing neighborhood and community volunteer systems started small and expanded. Grassroots service organizations, such as Youth Volunteer Corps, Public Allies, Foster Grandparents, and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, focus on a single age group, but they give us a model of successful program organization. An intergenerational infrastructure builds on existing organizations, brings them together to form a stronger community effort, one that links, crisscrosses, and uses many different ways of touching and of including individuals.

Envision a future in which schools have such an intergenerational infrastructure. Older adults play a prominent role, so that every student has a mentor. The intergenerational infrastructure welcomes individuals who wish to participate, matches needs and people, connects people to tasks they enjoy, and applauds them for improving education and community life. The infrastructure may be different for every community, but it will be based on existing volunteer systems and will include all ages.

Bringing older adults and young people together does not always guarantee a meaningful experience. Older adults sitting in an auditorium listening to children sing is a beginning, but does it provide an opportunity for meaningful interaction between generations? Contrast that with the St. Francis intergenerational day-care program in Albuquerque, N.M. That program allows children from a very young age to share their day with senior citizens in the adjoining nursing home. Parents of one 4-year-old who participates in the program made the following comment: "Our daughter feels right at home with older people now, regardless of their frailties."

Promoting understanding between generations follows a simple scenario, as described by an older mentor in Sonora, Calif. "I observe the students in their classes, and I identify at least one thing that the student does well or enjoys. I build our sessions around that talent or interest.

In essence, I link our tutoring sessions to something the student can do well and build little successes." Such successful mentoring is a two-way street. Both generations gain. Children reap the benefits from the attention of older people, but they also experience the uplifting feeling that they are giving something of value to the mentor. The outcome is increased self-esteem.

William Raspberry, the syndicated newspaper columnist, calls mentoring "how-to lessons—how to resist negative peer pressure, how to achieve in the face of economic difficulty, how to find adults who can help fulfill career dreams."

Intergenerational is an idea whose time has come, why isn't there a greater acceptance? One reason is that teachers are pulled in so many different directions, they find intergenerational programs just another demand. Although today's teachers are better prepared for their mission as educators, they are often unable to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Their reluctance to participate in intergenerational programs originates from a valid concern expressed succinctly by one high school teacher: "Won't this program mean more work for me?" One principal remarked: "Sometimes our teachers feel as if they are tugboats pulling this enormous ship filled with curriculum requirements." They look to intergenerational programs not as a helpful intervention, but as an added burden.

In a high school survey on intergenerational programs, the number-one concern was that the older adults would not be able to work with teenagers. "I'm afraid to walk into some of my classes," one teacher joked. Many teach-

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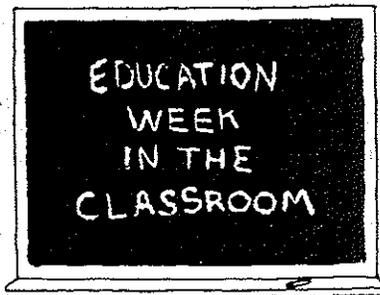
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ers felt that the older volunteers would not be able to adapt to different students or difficult situations. Administrators who single-handedly manage discipline for hundreds of students are also wary of the additional problems that an intergenerational program might bring.

Carol Tice, the founder of Teaching Learning Communities, allays that fear. "Educators must realize," she says, "that prepara-

should be a natural component of what they are already doing. Throughout the country, educators are focusing their efforts on improving quality. While these efforts have taken many forms, three of the most popular trends have centered on learning styles, school-to-work programs, and service learning.

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences identifies seven ways that people learn, ranging from kinetic activities such as dance to speaking and more abstract constructions. We know that students learn differently, and yet how can one teacher teach to all these learning styles?

School-to-work, another area gathering educational momentum in recent years, addresses the concern that students are not being adequately prepared for the world of work. And service learn-

ing is not a separate and extra item to be dealt with, but rather the next logical step. Educators have already begun laying the foundation for its inclusion and need only realize its relevance to the changes in education already in progress.

The most compelling reasons for expanding intergenerational programs are the great gains made by children and adults who participate in them. Those gains in turn rub off on the institutions involved. Teachers who have been involved with intergenerational programs talk about the boost and renewed energy they get from bringing generations together. It is like the little tugboat being given additional horsepower. But that is just the beginning—the students' behavior improves; they seem to approach their studies with greater enthusiasm and become more confident in themselves as learners; and they discover they are valuable.

Collaboration between schools and community-based organizations, partnerships between schools and retirement centers, and teachers reaching out through civic organizations are only a few of the ways intergenerational programs establish the spirit of cooperation. That spirit was vital in the early days of our country when survival meant everyone's taking responsibility for everyone else. It is just as vital today. ■

*For further information on intergenerational programs, the authors suggest that readers contact Generations United, in care of the Child Welfare League of America, 440 First St., N.W., Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20001. Telephone: (202) 638-2952. Fax: (202) 638-4004.*



Patricia Raine

tion of seniors and students sets the stage for a beneficial interchange." Research from mentoring programs for at-risk students has shown that behavioral problems may exist at the beginning of the program, but that in no time the students take ownership of a positive relationship with their mentors.

Though many educators clearly perceive intergenerational programming as an added burden, it

combines volunteer activities with learning. Students have hands-on experiences that help them hone problem-solving and other skills while simultaneously contributing to the community. In the midst of all these endeavors, however, a very special resource has all too often been ignored, a resource that could facilitate the implementation of programs in these areas—older adults.

Intergenerational program-