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INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS: A MANUAL FOR SUCCESS

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The Issue: Ageism

Although there are always social issues which must be faced by educators and by society, three issues in particular demand attention in the 1990s. Racism, sexism, and a third "ism"—one relatively new to our vocabulary—ageism. Referring to the discrimination against a group or an individual because of age, ageism is most often practiced against members of two distinct groups in our society: those over 60, and those under the age of 18.

Educators and community and business leaders have only recently begun to realize that ageism not only limits the workforce, but the very practice leads to alienation of two groups that make up 50 percent of the population. The Dade County Public Schools have continued to demonstrate their ability to make an impact on these critical issues with a network of intergenerational programs.

The success of programs such as Project Move, Adopt-a-Grandparent, Dade Parents, and the Senior Mentor Program has shown that volunteers working hand-in-hand with citizen-students can help

ensure the success of the educational system. Dade County, Florida has been using expert and qualified assistance from outside sources for years to help ensure successful educational programs. One such outside source, which can offer immediate assistance to educators, is the increased involvement of citizens from communities served by local school systems. Community involvement and active participation in educationally sound endeavors can have a tremendous impact on the provision of services for students while simultaneously combatting ageism.

Volunteer Programs

Most Dade County Schools have one or more "Dade Partners," an extensive volunteer program organized and monitored by the Dade County Public Schools Department of Community Participation. These "partners in education" are community and business leaders who donate time, expertise gained from past experiences, and, at times, financial assistance while working on behalf of "their schools." These programs have helped develop and enrich the talents of students.

Volunteerism

Project Move is another Dade effort in volunteerism. Miami's older volunteers in education tutor students and work with them in arts and crafts projects. The Adopt-a-Grandparent program has grown from nine pilot schools in 1983 to more than 50 elementary, middle and senior high schools. Some 3,500 students, 3,000 nursing home residents, and other older persons are actively involved.

Since only approximately two percent of the senior population of Florida resides in nursing homes, another program, one with even more far-reaching social and educational implications, has been established. The Senior Mentor Program brings gifted students together with retired, active older persons to expose students to real-life community organization and the social change process. Dedicated seniors, community leaders, partners in education, and senior mentors assist the school system not only in a dollars and cents savings for educational programs, but by providing a vast array of learned skills and knowledge for the future leaders of our communities.

An Intergenerational Background

The Intergenerational Law Advocacy program was started in 1985 when Paul Nathanson, professor of law at the New Mexico School of Law, and Richard Kalish, social pathologist and gerontologist, began to address the social problem of ageism. These visionaries planned a major project designed to study the effects of ageism in this country and to subsequently address the problem effectively. The ultimate goal was the linking of adolescents with the

elderly in an on-going effort to "bridge the generational gap" and to improve relationships between these two groups in society.

The New Mexico pilot paired students from four high schools with retirees from local senior citizen centers. Teachers offered instruction in gerontology, and students and their older partners determined issues specifically related to problems of the older generation. These issues were brought before a Town Forum, the culminating event for the project. Some concerns that were identified were loneliness among the elderly, health care, and crimes against the elderly.

The governments represented at the Town Forums gave some financial assistance for health care for the elderly, and the students raised pledges for donations for professional dental and vision care services for the elderly. These monies were placed in a trust fund to help defray medical expenses for the elderly with the greatest need.

The final goal of the New Mexico pilot was to develop a program that could be emulated in other areas. And in 1987, with support from the Villers Foundation in Washington, D.C., the Institute of Public Law (IPL) began the Intergenerational Law Advocacy Program to address crime against the elderly. Florida was one of five states selected to participate in the project.

Expansion and Growth

In January 1988, on a strictly voluntary basis, approximately 350 students began

their study of policy issues that affect the elderly. As in the New Mexico pilot, students from several participating Dade County high schools were paired with groups representing older people to determine what type of community-oriented projects could be undertaken on their behalf.

“Older adults and Law Advocacy students will assist lawmakers in the drafting of laws that will have a positive influence on the future of both older adults and the youth of Florida.”

A number of personal “pairings” of Senior Mentors and students began to develop into genuine and permanent social relationships. Gifted students, students at risk and students from all participating high schools were involved. In 1989, Dade Middle School students joined the participating high schools by adding Dade Partners, the Senior Mentor program, Project MOVE, Adopt-a-Grandparent, and the Intergenerational Law Advocacy Program to their curricula.

Dade County’s Intergenerational Law Advocacy Program has been involved in the following vital areas:

1. Law Advocacy students are given the opportunity to exchange ideas with speakers from various advocacy organizations who have knowledge about older adult concerns as well as

issues concerning the young. These Law Advocacy students also attend and actively participate in public forums and legislative hearings that deal specifically with age-related issues.

2. Law Advocacy students participate in a network of advocates who are developing strategies to improve policies for the overall well-being of both the elderly and the young.
3. Older adults and Law Advocacy students will assist Florida lawmakers in the drafting of laws that will have a positive influence on the future of both older adults and the productive youth of Florida.

Mutual Benefits to Old and Young

Working one-on-one with Dade’s youth has been a successful way for many older adults to realize their dream of helping young people overcome the “anxieties of youth.” Wesley Wilson, age 71, expressed his sentiments: “I enjoy exposing today’s young people to a world they otherwise may never have learned about. Besides, by being an active Senior Mentor, I don’t have time to just sit around and fret about my personal aches and pains.” Mr. Wilson works with a young man who had been identified as a potential school drop-out. Today, with Mr. Wilson by his side, the young man attends school regularly, has a “B” average in his classes, and is making plans to attend college.

The Senior Mentor program has grown from 20 mentors to well over 100 dedicated people since it began four years ago. Quality is the key. Senior mentors

are chosen and asked to design programs based on their personal expertise. Interested students are then paired with the senior mentor most "geared" to their individual needs. Involvement is strictly voluntary on everyone's part.

The students of the Dade County Intergenerational Law Advocacy Program adopted a Bill of Rights for Older Adults in 1989 written by a student participant of the program.

America's Older Adults. . . . have the right to respect!

America's Older Adults. . . . have the right to adequate health care!

America's Older Adults. . . . have the right to proper food, and housing!

America's Older Adults. . . . have the right to protection from crime!

America's Older Adults. . . . have the right to share with all of us their wisdom, and their lifetime of experiences!

We, as American teenagers, have the obligation to help to secure these rights for America's older adults. . . . remembering that we too will one day become older adults, and, one day, we too will wish to have these rights granted to us!

These statements exemplify the positive impact that the Dade County Programs have on breaking down the barriers of ageism.

Bumper's Buddies

In closing, I share an example of an intergenerational program in Dade County: the Animal Companionship Project. The project was created by Dr. Richard Dillman, a retired veterinarian. All of the students who were chosen for the project were considered to be at risk of dropping out of school. Three mornings a week, throughout the entire school year, the students spent two hours at the agricultural school. Dr. Dillman taught them to train animals, including rabbits, cats, birds, dogs and a 950-pound, one-year-old bull named Bumper. Bumper is an orphan born at the Miami Agricultural School, one of the Dade County public schools.

Bumper has had a wonderful effect on the lives of the 15 sixth grade students who cared for him. Before they began working with Dr. Dillman and their animal companions, these students' attendance record was a combined 57 percent. By the end of the school year, their attendance averaged 97 percent. Their conduct and grades also improved greatly over the school year. Best of all, their attitude toward school has completely turned around. Before, they thought school was dull, now they think it is fun.

This year, the students will be taking the animals they trained on visits to their adopted grandparents at a nearby nursing home. They will be sharing the joy that the animals have brought them with the elderly residents. In addition to changing the lives of participating students, the animal companionship project has the potential for becoming a wonderful communication link between the young and old.