
THE CASE FOR SCHOOLS AND OLDER ADULTS

Why should public education care about engaging older adults? The answer is clear: self-interest and for better overall student and community outcomes.

By strategically leveraging older adults' involvement in schools and public education, a number of outcomes can be achieved including increasing direct financial support for schools (tax and philanthropic), greater use of existing and new facilities, greater use of retired principals and teachers, direct support for current teachers and principals, direct support for students, as well as for their parents, and, in the end, meaningful and important roles for a very large number of older adults.

Public schools face many challenges. As America's percentage of older adults is significantly increasing due to the aging of the boomers, the proportion of families with children is at an all-time low. This threat to public education comes at a time when public investment of resources for operating and capital support is critically needed and as communities age, older adults without children may not be willing to support funding for public education. Public education is also experiencing, along with other private and public employers, the aging of its own workforce. Social issues and the challenges of individual students come into the classroom and the pressure from the public for accountability and results intensifies.

Older adults represent a significant opportunity for educational leaders to tap and optimize. The boomers will be the healthiest, most educated and most affluent older population in human history. Many will have the time and desire to work, as well as desire to give back, as the overall Task Force on Vital Aging report clearly demonstrates. The following ideas are brief suggestions that hopefully will stimulate further thought and development by those most closely involved in improving schools and in increasing support for public education.

It is a core principle in nonprofit fund development that involvement and engagement in an organization generally must come first before significant financial contributions are secured. Creating opportunities for older adults to be engaged in schools will likely have the same important outcome whether it is support for tax measures and/or philanthropic contributions.

The following are some of the potential ways that older adults could be involved in public education, both inside the school building and outside in the community. These could be win/win relationships for school personnel and for the students and their parents. Education is not just occurring in the classroom so tutoring, mentoring, after school, and summer activities are becoming increasingly important.

Support for Principals – “Loaned executives” could manage a myriad of projects, facility concerns, etc., that take principals away from directly supporting teachers and curriculum development.

Support for Teachers – We know that classrooms that have teacher or classroom aides perform better than ones without. With larger classroom sizes, there are a number of ways a teacher's aide could be very helpful.

Support for Students – Programs like Oasis, SMART and Big Brothers/ Big Sisters provide mentors to students to help with reading and other activities that make a critical difference. The business community is looking for 5 key attributes that coming out of hiring priorities; problem solving, communication and interpersonal skills as well as personal ethics and a strong work ethic. Older adults have the potential to mentor the value and importance of all five of these areas.

Support for Parents – Providing support for parents with children, especially parents with very young children, also has a significant impact. Parent aide programs nationally are one model that could be significantly expanded.

Early Childhood- We know that the early years have an enormous impact on a child's future emotional health and readiness for school. Older adults with the right support can be a powerful new force for addressing many of the challenges that very young children and their parents face.

Two important observations on the above ideas: First, many principals, teachers, students and parents suffer from a sense of isolation. Services are often available, but knowledge of them can be scarce and trying to access them can be daunting. Each of the suggested roles above should have an advocacy function that includes knowing where and how to access available community services and support. The second key element is each of the roles identified could be paid and/or unpaid. As the Task Force report highlighted, increasingly older adults have many different reasons for working and financial compensation may only be one of many considerations.

The public education workforce is also aging and there is a great opportunity to engage retired teachers and principals in many roles such as supervisory roles for many of the new positions mentioned. Granted, there are retired teachers and principals who move on to something outside of public education, but many would like to stay involved and engaged in public education because they like it and for all the reasons mentioned in the overall Task Force report. Training and retraining for these and other new positions and roles are great opportunities for local graduate schools of education and for the unions.

One of the key leverage points for creating inter-generational opportunities is through using schools more as community centers for learning. In the 2002 article "Catching the Age Wave: Building Schools with Senior Citizens in Mind," (<http://www.schoolfacilities.net/pubs/agewave.pdf>) the author encourages today's educators to take the lead in forging a new inter-generational coalition of support for public education – a coalition that places a premium on building new facilities for multi-purpose use.

AARP past president Joe Perkins put it this way, "It makes no sense to lock up costly buildings two-thirds of a day and one-quarter of every year. Schools should be a point of unity, not division, between generations." As new schools are planned, branches of public

libraries should be considered a part of any new facility. As the boomers age, life-long learning will increasingly be a part of their lives. Higher education is preparing for this trend and public schools represent excellent locations for providing educational opportunities for all ages of adults.

Older adults have much to offer children and young people, and children have much to offer older adults. Other communities like Northfield, Minnesota, have and are considering this approach. Multnomah County leaders can step up to these opportunities as well.
