



Older Persons as Assets for Early Care and Education Programs: Investing in our Future Centenarians

Stanford Center on Longevity
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The Stanford Center on Longevity (SCL) advances a research-driven agenda that showcases the opportunities created by increased longevity by identifying actionable, evidence-based steps for enhancing the quality of longer lives from birth until death. One of SCL's areas of focus is on intergenerational connections, a key source of happiness.

The Opportunity

We can make a major contribution to ameliorate the staffing crisis in early childhood programs while also increasing the happiness, wellbeing, sense of purpose and financial security of older adults. We can have a win-win.

The State can strongly message that older people are a good resource for staffing these programs, conduct a cross-agency review of current training and apprenticeship programs for their availability to older people, encourage closer relationships between local agencies for aging and early childhood programs, and stimulate innovation.

This opportunity emerges from two developments:

First, life expectancy has increased dramatically. Over the past century, life expectancy has increased from just 47 years to 77 years old. Century long lives are becoming more common. California's population of persons over 50 is one of our best growing natural resources. Today, about 34% of California's population is over the age of 50. With these gains in longevity, those turning 50 have decades of life to look forward to, plan for and enjoy. SCL has outlined a **New Map of Life** (see attached chart) to serve as guidance given this increased longevity. Older people have much to offer in these later decades.

Second, California has made recent large investments in Early Care and Education (ECE). In 2021, the State mandated a five-year timeline to expand California's Universal Preschool (UPK)

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Program to provide access to free preschool for all four-year-olds. California also expanded subsidies for preschool and infant toddler care. Speaker Emeritus Rendon and many members of this Committee have been instrumental in encouraging the State to invest in early childhood. These new investments make our State more equitable—providing access for thousands of families who did not have the resources to pay for preschool or child care. Investing in our youngest children—our future centenarians—is a key principle in the New Map of Life. As the Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood chaired by Speaker Emeritus Rendon made clear, it is also an investment with big returns.

Dire Workforce Shortage

There is a huge barrier to successful statewide implementation of UPK and other early care and education expansions. According to a 2022 report by the [Learning Policy Institute](#), between 11,900 to 15,600 lead teachers and 16,000 to 19,700 assistant teachers are needed to meet the required student-adult ratio for UPK of 10:1 by 2025. These estimates do not even include the open staff positions outside of the public school system in preschools, child care and child development centers that serve children 0 to 5.

Older People as Assets for Early Care and Education Programs

We know that older people are seeking emotionally meaningful experiences. First, research shows people in the later decades of their lives are more emotionally well-adjusted than any other age group. They become more prosocial: they find happiness in giving to others. They want to, and do, help others more. And when they volunteer, they find an enormous sense of purpose.

Already thousands of older people volunteer at schools, community organizations and various programs serving children. Sometimes they receive a stipend for their work. One of the most studied programs of older people working in elementary school settings is Experience Corps run by AARP. In this program, older adults tutor young children in grades K-3 in reading while also serving as supportive and consistent mentors. Program evaluations have shown that this intervention improves children's reading abilities and decreases classroom disruptions. There are benefits for the older adult volunteers as well. Following their year-long participation in the classroom, they report more exercise, healthy behavior, and enhanced emotional well-being. The nonprofit Generation XChange has built on this model and is operating in seven elementary schools in Los Angeles. The older volunteers receive a stipend for working ten hours a week.

Over the past 18 months, SCL has interviewed over a hundred early childhood experts who are tasked with staffing UPK, preschool and infant/toddler care to inquire about their attempts to recruit and train older people to fill some of these positions. We thought that older adults would be especially well suited for the assistant teacher position, which requires less preparation and training. We found no one who was intentionally recruiting older adults. People over 50 are often experiencing life transitions (such as retirement and becoming empty nesters) that present new opportunities for their life map. One of the key principles of the New Map of Life is to see such life transitions as “a feature, not a bug” in the life journey.

We did hear about a number of training and apprenticeship programs that focus on recruiting and serving young adults at the beginning of their careers in early care and education—offering financial aid, training, paid internships, mentoring and placement. However, we did not find any program focused on recruiting older adults.

Focus Groups

Before taking action, we wanted to get valuable input from older adults about their reception to this idea and their feedback on how to make it a reality. To do so, we conducted five focus groups: one with directors and teachers at ECE settings and four with older adults interested in getting involved in ECE. These focus groups took place in Los Angeles, Montgomery Park, Santa Cruz, and Aptos over the past six months.

The ECE site staff reported that they would value the involvement of older adults in their classrooms, as they would help provide more one-on-one attention to the children and draw from their unique perspectives and life experience. Several common themes emerged from focus groups with older adults interested in ECE. First, all of the focus group participants expressed a love for young children and passion for supporting their growth. Some of them had desired to enter this field for a long time but had been constrained by family responsibilities, financial limitations, and existing work commitments. Many were from the local community they would serve, often immigrants, Spanish speakers, or dual language learners. Now that they are older, they are making a transition to their dream of working with children, often by getting their required permits or credentials at community college. All of the older adults reported that they were interested in paid work as opposed to volunteering, with some noting the need for pay due to their financial positions.

In addition to working with our youngest generation, focus group participants were also eager to work alongside multiple generations of adults. They reported no hesitation in working for a younger lead teacher or mentor, as long as there is mutual respect. They are happy to learn alongside and from all ages. Further, they were interested in a range of commitment levels, from working a few hours a week in a flexible substitute assistant teacher role to working full time as a lead or assistant teacher.

Pilot Programs

Following this interest, and applying some funds from other philanthropic resources, we were able to catalyze and support three small pilot programs. Research on each of these pilots will be conducted by a postdoctoral fellow from SCL who is an expert on lifespan development and intergenerational relationships. Pilot participants, mentor teachers, and center/school staff will complete pre and post program surveys to investigate the impact of their participation on their own health and wellbeing, as well as the classroom environment.

In Fresno, the County Office of Education is recruiting people 50 and above for a paid internship at its Lighthouse Child Development Center (operated with First Five). The participants will serve as substitute teacher assistants and, at the end of the program, they will likely seek jobs

at the Lighthouse or the large number of child development centers and UPK classrooms in Fresno County schools and Fresno City Schools. Participants will receive training and mentoring from master teachers.

In Los Angeles, the Mayor's Office of Economic Development has an early childhood initiative called the Early Childhood Education Student Advancement Program. Over the past four years, this initiative has partnered with the Los Angeles Community College District and local development centers to recruit students for a program that includes orientation, a paid internship at a child care or child development center, mentoring, and coaching about careers in ECE. Over its history, funders of this program have targeted recruitment of 18- to 30-year-olds. With some additional funding, they will now be able to recruit a small number of people over the age of 50 for the upcoming cohort.

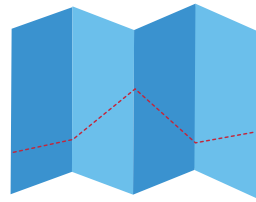
In Santa Cruz, we collaborated with the principal of a well-respected elementary school (Bay View Elementary) to recruit older adults from the neighborhood to work at the school. To date, with some philanthropic funds, the school recruited older adults to serve as either a substitute assistant teacher in transitional kindergarten classrooms or assistant in the extended day program for 4- and 5-year-olds. We hope to expand the cohort to include more older adults in the fall.

These are small pilots. The State should take steps to encourage expansion and momentum for recruiting older adults for ECE program staffing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

California leadership can underscore the importance of early childhood and issue a strong statement that older people can serve as great resources for staffing ECE programs. An innovation fund could help replicate and expand pilot programs to move away from siloed efforts to a more systemwide practice.

State departments can encourage closer relationships at the state and local level between agencies for aging and providers of ECE. Closer ties between these entities will benefit both schools and community-based organizations by bringing in new staff. Finally, the State can conduct a cross-agency review and disseminate results of existing training and apprenticeship programs that could include a focus on older participants interested in the ECE field.



THE NEW MAP of LIFE

Make use of
age diversity.



Create longevity-
ready communities.



Align health spans
to life spans.



Build financial security
from the start.



Invest in future
centenarians to
deliver big returns.



Support life
transitions.



Learn throughout life.



Work more years, with
greater flexibility.



Harness scientific
and technological
breakthroughs to
transform the future
of aging.



Ensure that advances are
distributed to the entire
population.

