LIFELONG LEARNERS

Community News & Insights March 2026

Intergenerational SCHOOLS

Innovating Education: 25 Years of Doing School Differently

Innovation means building around what works, not just what's new. For 25 years, the Intergenerational Schools have designed every element of our model around two core truths: children learn at different paces and in different ways, and community strengthens learning across generations.

This quarter, we have good reason to reflect on what that commitment looks like over time. The Intergenerational Schools have been named a 2025 Program of Distinction by Generations United — a national recognition of outstanding intergenerational programs — and you can read more about that designation in this issue's feature story.

This year also brought another milestone:

A chapter I authored on the Intergenerational Schools appears in the newly published ***Oxford Handbook of Intergenerational Connection*** (Oxford University Press, 2025).

The chapter traces the reasons our model was built with intergenerational programs at its center, how those programs have grown and navigated real challenges including the pandemic, and how we continue to deepen community engagement today.

Both recognitions reflect the same thing: a model that keeps working because it was built around what children and communities actually need. Thank you for being part of it.

Brooke King, CEO
Intergenerational Schools

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This Quarter's Focus

Innovating Education

At the Intergenerational Schools, innovating education means something specific: building a model around how children actually learn, not around how schools have traditionally been organized. No other school network does things quite the way we do.
This quarter, we're exploring what that looks like in practice — from a national recognition of our intergenerational programs to arts and music experiences that develop real skills in students who are ready to lead. Because when education is built around what works, it transforms.

FEATURE STORY

For 25 years, we've built a model that fundamentally reimagines what school can be, earning national recognition for our distinctive approach to intergenerational learning.

National Recognition for Intergenerational Model

For 25 years, intergenerational connection has been the foundation of how the Intergenerational Schools work. This year, that commitment received national recognition. The Intergenerational Schools have been named a 2025 Program of Distinction by Generations United, a national organization that recognizes outstanding programs connecting younger and older people across the United States. The designation places the Intergenerational Schools among a select group of programs representing the highest standards of innovation, leadership, and best practices in intergenerational work.

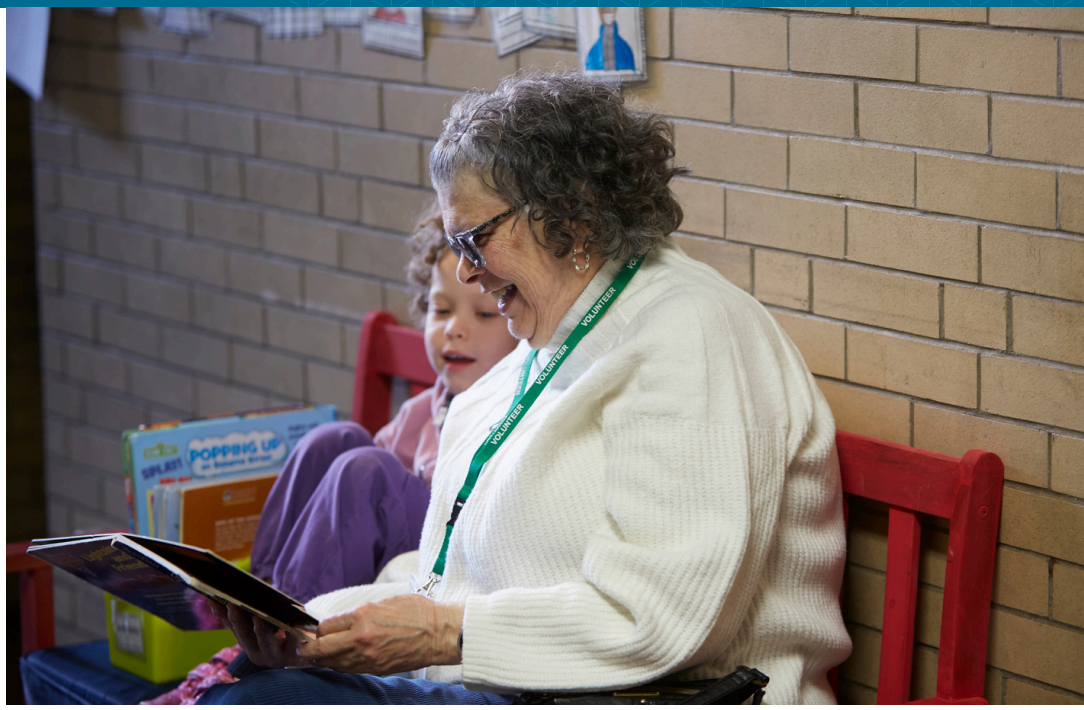
The Program of Distinction designation is awarded annually to programs that meet rigorous criteria: addressing documented community needs, tying activities to program goals and participant input, providing formal training and orientation for participants, collecting and using evaluation data to improve outcomes, and building strong partnerships with organizational leadership and the broader community.

For the Intergenerational Schools, this recognition reflects something that has been part of the model since the beginning. Our students don't simply learn about community — they learn within it, alongside people from different generations who bring their own experiences, wisdom, and curiosity to the classroom.

Each year, the Intergenerational Schools partner with more than a dozen senior service organizations to create meaningful learning connections.

In the 2024-2025 school year, that included 140 intergenerational visits, 27 Learning Partners volunteering weekly, and partnerships with 13 senior service organizations. These visits aren't enrichment add-ons. They are curriculum.

When a student reads aloud to a learning partner, explains a math



"This recognition reflects the commitment of our entire community — students, families, staff, and the many partner organizations who make intergenerational learning possible," said Board Chair Stacey Miller.

concept, or simply listens to a story from someone who has lived through history, they are practicing communication, building empathy, and developing the kind of community awareness that follows them well beyond the school day. For the older adults in these partnerships, the engagement is equally meaningful — providing purpose, connection, and the particular joy of watching a young person grow.

"This recognition reflects the commitment of our entire community — students, families, staff, and the many partner organizations who make intergenerational learning possible," said Board Chair Stacey Miller.

The designation arrives during the Intergenerational Schools' 25th anniversary year, a fitting moment to reflect on what has made this model endure.

Twenty-five years of visits, partnerships, and shared moments across generations have shaped not only how our students learn, but who they become.

Generations United's recognition affirms what our community experiences every day: that when generations learn from and with each other, everyone grows.

To learn more about our intergenerational partnerships or to bring this programming to your organization, visit igschools.org or contact Seamus O'Hara at sohara@igschools.org.

Intergenerational SCHOOLS

Take a Moment to Share a Moment

This anniversary year, we're gathering stories that capture what makes the Intergenerational Schools meaningful, from alumni reflections to parent perspectives to Learning Partner memories. Your story helps us celebrate our impact and inspires others to join this community. **Share your story at igschools.org/25years**

SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

Innovation and creativity go hand-in-hand. Explore how students learn to see the world differently through the arts at the Intergenerational Schools

Cast members encourage each other before showtime

Arts at the Intergenerational Schools

From Auditions to Opening Night: TIS-East Brings Theater to Life

This March, the Intergenerational School-East put on its first-ever full musical production — and took it all the way to the Playhouse Square stage.

The production of Winnie the Pooh Kids was made possible through Disney Musicals in Schools, a program hosted by Playhouse Square that brings musical theater experiences to Cleveland schools through competitive grants. Principal Aziz Ahmad, M.Ed., applied for the grant and secured TIS-East's spot in the program. Starting in October, students and staff had 19 weeks to build a show from the ground up.

The after-school club was open to all stages. Developing Stage students (grades 3-5) took priority for lead roles per grant requirements, Primary Stage students (K-2) joined the ensemble, and Applying Stage students (grades 7-8) served as stage crew. About 30 students participated in all. Eva Mihelich directed, Patrick Hill led music, Arden Berg choreographed, and Jennifer Orbash stage managed — with each taking on additional roles from fundraising to costumes to set design and tech.

The cast performed three shows for the TIS-East school community, then performed a

Theater Program at TIS–East continued

number from the show on the Playhouse Square stage during the program's Student-Share celebration.

The program's impact extended beyond opening night. TIS-East received a separate $2,500 grant from Disney to help build a foundation for its theater program, funds that have already gone toward improving the school's sound system. The school has also been gifted free musical rights for a second year, something the program typically only offers once.

Theater is applied learning: students rehearsing Winnie the Pooh Kids were also developing public speaking skills, building confidence, taking creative risks, and collaborating across grades in ways that a traditional lesson cannot replicate. For TIS-East, it is exactly the kind of hands-on, student-centered experience the Intergenerational Schools are built to create.
The curtain has only just gone up. Mr. Ahmad said the school hopes to continue the program for as long as possible.

Hear for Yourself! Listen to two students' projects created for this assignment.

Zinnia Fraundfelder's "Fall"

Elijah Peoples, Sample Project

Composing Confidence through Music: Soundtrap at Near West

Innovative education happens wherever students have space to tap into new ways of thinking and understanding their world—whether that's on stage with classmates, in reading discussions with older adults, or alone at a keyboard, composing an original piece of music.

Near West music teacher Erica Zappia was recently featured on **Soundtrap's education blog** as a standout example of how student-centered music instruction can build confidence among K-8 students.

In her classes, students in grades 5-8 split time between violin instruction and original song production using Soundtrap, a browser-based music creation platform. The results, according to the post, have left teachers moved to tears and parents asking for the playlist.

Zappia's approach is deliberately open-ended. She requires a minimum length, a set number of tracks, specific instruments, but creative decisions belong entirely to the student. "If this isn't their jam, they can just follow the requirements to a great grade," she explains. "If it is their jam, they can push their Chromebooks to the max with the level of detail they put into the song."

Students work independently, problem-solving with each other rather than depending on the teacher to help them follow a pre-determined path to success. The less she directs, she says, the more creative the outcomes.

Exercising this creative freedom through open-ended music composition is a powerful way to teach innovative thinking and build confidence that echoes far beyond music class.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Our students thrive because they're part of a community that believes in them, from volunteers and staff to families to the students themselves.

A New Kind of Support: The SPARCK Program Launches

This year, the Intergenerational Schools joined a new partnership designed to bring coordinated healthcare support directly into our school community.

Through the School Program for Access, Resilience, Collaboration and Knowledge (SPARCK), the Intergenerational Schools are partnering with the Cleveland Clinic, the Educational Service Center of Northeast Ohio, Neighborhood Family Practice, Ohio Guidestone, and other regional healthcare providers. The program is funded through a new federal grant.

At the center of this collaboration is E**mily Slusarz, LPCC-S**, a licensed Mental Health Navigator from the **Cleveland Clinic** who works directly with our students and families. Her role bridges the gap between school, home, and healthcare.

She connects families to appropriate care, coordinating with existing providers, and supporting students navigating medical or mental health needs.

Services available through SPARCK include onsite medical appointments, behavioral health assessments, caregiver support, care coordination with outside providers, and assistance with school planning meetings such as IEPs and 504 Plans. The program also provides ongoing professional development for teachers and staff focused on trauma-informed practices, and contributed $5,000 in supplies to support student well-being across both campuses.

Our goal is straightforward: every student deserves access to the care and support that helps them thrive.

LOOKING AHEAD

Upcoming Events

Spring Thing • May 1

Join the Intergenerational Schools on May 1 at Horsehoe Lake in Shaker Heights to culminate our yearlong celebration of our 25th Anniversary. This event is open to current and prospective families, volunteers, community partners and alumni. RSVP here or contact Seamus O'Hara at sohara@igschools.org.

Save the Date: A Storied Celebration • April 17, 2027 at Cleveland Public Library's MLK, Jr. branch

An evening to chronicle IGS history and launch the next chapter. Sponsorships and individual tickets available at igschools.org/celebration

A Note on This Quarter's Theme

Throughout this issue, you've seen Innovating Education in action: a national recognition affirming 25 years of intergenerational programming, students exercising creative expression and building confidence, and a new partnership bringing coordinated health and mental health support directly into our school community. These are not isolated moments. They are the result of a model intentionally built around what children truly need to thrive, and a community that shows up every day to meet that need.

Intergenerational SCHOOLS

EAST
Buckeye-Woodhill

NEAR WEST
Ohio City

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