



AGUA FRIA HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
COPPER MEDALLION AWARD SUBMISSION

SENIOR TO SENIOR -
BRIDGING GENERATIONS
THROUGH CONNECTION AND SERVICE

Category: Excellence in Education & Community Partnerships

Melinda Marchese
Director of Communications & Community Initiatives
Agua Fria High School District
(623) 932-7033
mmarchese@aguafria.org

Superintendent:
Mark Yslas
Agua Fria High School District

Community Lead:
Mary Kay Utecht
Goodyear Pebble Creek Rotary



Overview

The Agua Fria High School District's Senior to Senior Program exemplifies community-centered education at its best, building powerful bridges between generations while fostering leadership, empathy, and civic responsibility among students. Established in Fall 2022 under the leadership of Superintendent Mark Yslas and directed by Melinda Marchese, Director of Communications and Community Initiatives, the program connects graduating high school seniors from all five district high schools (Agua Fria, Canyon View, Desert Edge, Millennium and Verrado) with senior adult retirees from the Goodyear Pebble Creek Rotary and Verrado Rotary Clubs and the broader West Valley community.

What began as a pilot with 24 adult volunteers and 24 students has evolved into a districtwide initiative involving more than 80 participants annually. This growth is sustained by strong community partnerships, strategic communication through newsletters and social media, and consistent leadership engagement. The program's innovative "Families" ensures personalized interaction between students and adult mentors, while monthly themed events ranging from community service projects and culinary collaborations to Read Across America Days with our elementary feeder schools strengthen social-emotional skills and community ties.

The program's comprehensive public relations strategy includes targeted recruitment through district newsletters QR-code campaigns, and Rotary Club partnerships, along with consistent storytelling through local press and district media. Evaluation through surveys, focus groups, and attendance tracking demonstrates significant growth in student confidence, empathy, and leadership skills, while adult participants report renewed purpose and connection.

Now recognized as a district signature initiative, Senior to Senior embodies the spirit of the Copper Medallion Award: it is strategic, collaborative, and sustainable, all while developing meaningful and authentic adult/student connections. By connecting education with community, the program models how school districts can foster lifelong learning and social cohesion across generations. Aligned with our district's vision of creating choice, crafting character, and cultivating community, Senior to Senior exemplifies how educational programs can empower students to grow as individuals while strengthening bonds within the broader community.

Building Multigenerational Relationships!



Research

Development began with community feedback and comparative research into intergenerational programs. AFHSD identified three key insights:

1. **Desire for Meaningful Connection:** Retirees wanted structured, purposeful engagement with youth.
2. **Student Need for Leadership Practice:** Students expressed interest in service and mentorship beyond academics.
3. **Community Readiness:** Rotary and local partners were eager to co-lead a long-term, districtwide project.

Program leaders conducted ongoing focus groups with principals, Rotary members, and students to guide adjustments in structure, scheduling, and communication methods. The use of Google Classroom, event calendars, and Family Groups emerged directly from these insights.

Planning

Target Audiences:

- Internal: High school seniors, principals, and district staff.
- External: Retirees, Rotary clubs, local families, and the broader community.

Objectives: Our objective is to have one event each month of the school year that is led by senior adults and students partnering together to foster these relationships and accomplish the following:

1. Build intergenerational relationships that foster empathy, leadership, and civic engagement.
2. Increase community partnership and awareness of AFHSD initiatives.
3. Create a sustainable, scalable districtwide volunteer program.
4. Strengthen district reputation for innovative and inclusive community outreach.
5. Increase our adult community to visit inside the walls of our school, both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities.

Roles and Responsibilities

District Coordinator:

- Provides overall leadership and oversight for the program across the district.
- Ensures alignment with district policies, goals, and strategic priorities.
- Coordinates communication between district administration, community partners, and school sites.
- Oversees data collection, reporting, and evaluation to measure program impact.
- Supports training, resources, and professional development for site and community coordinators.
- Manages district-level logistics, budgeting, and program compliance.

Community Adult Coordinator:

- Serves as the primary point of contact between community volunteers/adult participants and the school district.
- Recruits, screens, and orients adult volunteers participating in the program.
- Provides ongoing support, communication, and documentation for volunteer involvement.
- Coordinates schedules, community partnerships, and participation opportunities.
- Ensures a safe, meaningful, and organized experience for both adults and students.
- Collects feedback and monitors engagement to improve the program's effectiveness.

School Site Program Coordinator:

- Manages daily operations of the program at an individual school site.
- Coordinates student participation, scheduling, and on-site logistics.
- Works closely with teachers, staff, and volunteers to support consistent implementation.
- Tracks attendance, outcomes, and program activities at the school level.
- Maintains communication with the District Coordinator and Community Adult Coordinator.
- Ensures compliance with site-level procedures, safety standards, and program expectations.
- Supports students and volunteers to ensure a positive, supportive environment.

Strategic Sequence:

- Spring: Principals nominate 8 senior students per site.
- Spring/Summer: Community adults recruited via Rotary and digital newsletters with QR code sign-ups.
- Fall: Kickoff meetings build relationships and establish program norms.
- Year-round: Monthly themed events and service projects.
- Provide the groups with VIP Event passes for the entire school year. Participants receive a VIP pass granting them access to school events throughout the year, including athletic games, theater performances, concerts, and exhibitions. This encourages ongoing engagement and connection beyond the classroom.

Below is the detailed calendar and planning checklist for each event in the **2025–2026 Senior to Senior Program**, designed to ensure organization, communication, and successful execution across all school sites.

AUGUST 2025

Adult Kickoff Meeting

Purpose: Welcome returning and new adult participants; review expectations, event calendar, and communication tools.

Student Informational Meeting

Purpose: Introduce the program to new student participants and review expectations. This meeting includes all adult participants, site administration teams, and district leadership.

SEPTEMBER 2025

School Tours Day

Purpose: Adults tour each of the five district campuses; students host and showcase their campus including our CTE/Academy programs.

OCTOBER 2025

Speed Meeting and Lunch

Purpose: Relationship-building through guided get to know you question rounds. Location and Partnership for this event with Christ's Church of the Valley, Buckeye.

Friday Night Lights VIP Game

Purpose: Celebrate student/adult unity through school spirit and community pride. This signature event elevates the experience for both students and adults by treating them as VIP guests of the district. Participants receive a VIP pass granting them access to school events throughout the year, including athletic games, theater performances, concerts, and exhibitions. This encourages ongoing engagement and connection beyond the classroom.

NOVEMBER 2025

Friendsgiving Lunch @ Millennium High School (Hosted by MHS Culinary)

Purpose: Celebrate gratitude and highlight student culinary achievements

DECEMBER 2025

Explore CTE and Art @ Desert Edge High School

Purpose: Highlight student innovation in arts, agriculture, and media at one of our high school sites. This allows our seniors at that school site to showcase what is happening inside the walls of the school. Our adults get to walk the halls during the school day to interact and do projects in our classrooms.

JANUARY 2026

Community Service Day with Sleep in Heavenly Peace

Purpose: A powerful, hands-on service project that unites students and adult volunteers in building beds for local children in need. This event embodies the heart of the Senior to Senior Program, serving the community together while learning compassion, teamwork, and leadership through action. Participants collaborate side by side in an authentic, purpose-driven environment, constructing, sanding, and assembling beds that will directly impact families in the West Valley. For students, it is an opportunity to see the tangible results of their service and to connect civic responsibility with real-world impact. For adult participants, it offers a meaningful way to mentor youth in problem-solving, craftsmanship, and empathy.

FEBRUARY 2026

Community Service Day with the local Elementary School District

Purpose: Community Service Project creating grocery bags to prep for the Food Bank.

MARCH 2026

Read Across America Day with the Local Elementary School District

Purpose: Promote literacy and celebrate intergenerational mentorship through a cross-generational collaboration among elementary students, high school seniors, and active adult community members. This event serves as one of the most heartwarming and educational moments of the year, showcasing the shared joy of reading and storytelling while uniting three generations within a single learning experience. Students and adults from the Senior to Senior program visit elementary classrooms to read aloud, share personal stories, and inspire a love for books and lifelong learning. Elementary students benefit from positive role models, high school students gain leadership and communication experience, and adults enjoy the chance to nurture curiosity and imagination in young learners. The event underscores the program’s purpose, bridging ages through literacy, compassion, and mentorship that ripple across the community.



READ ACROSS AMERICA DAY

APRIL 2026

Graduation Celebration in the Park

Purpose: Honor graduating seniors and recognize adult mentors.

May 2026

Graduation Ceremonies

Purpose: Family Leaders from the program attend graduation in caps and gowns to honor graduating seniors.

Implementation

Program Growth:

- 2022–2024: 4–6 students per site; 24 adult participants.
- 2024–2026: 8–10 students per site; 43 adult participants.
- Adults represent Goodyear Pebble Creek Rotary, Verrado Rotary, and community members recruited through quarterly newsletters.
- The program has maintained a waitlist for two consecutive years.



FRIENDSGIVING

Attendance and Retention:

- Attendance at all events is required to foster consistent engagement.
- Equal student/adult representation is ensured monthly.
- Adult leaders commit to the first two “Get to Know You” events to establish early connection and trust.
- Family Leader Heads were established in 2024/25 to help make better connections with students and adults to help with trust and connection.

Marketing and Promotional Efforts:

- A senior student intern developed the Senior to Senior Logo
- Each member receives a logo shirt or jacket of the program, these are worn at every event
- Event Signage
- Each event is published on our social media handles, showing the community the program and the valued event
- Event Signage
- Featured in our Quarterly Community Connect Newsletter (pictured here)
- Highlight Videos wrapping up the year of events and testimonials

Core Event Examples (2025–2026):

- *Community Service Project:* Bed-building partnership with *Sleep in Heavenly Peace*.
- *Speed Meeting:* At Christ Church of the Valley
- *Thanksgiving Culinary Event:* Hosted by the Millennium High Culinary Arts program.
- *Read Across America Day:* At Eliseo Felix Elementary.
- *Graduation Celebration in the Park:* Culminating recognition of student and adult participants.

Leadership Team:

- Superintendent Oversight: Mark Yslas.
- District Lead: Melinda Marchese,
Director of Communications & Community Initiatives.
- Community Lead: Mary Kay Utecht, Goodyear Pebble Creek Rotary.



Communications:

- Coverage in *West Valley View* and *Community Connect* newsletter.
- Consistent updates via AFHSD Facebook and Instagram channels.
- Post-event recap videos shared internally and with community partners.

Evaluation:

- Participation increased from 47 in Year 2 to 80+ in Years 3 and 4.
- 90%+ attendance rate for all monthly events.
- Two-year adult participation waitlist maintained.
- Student Surveys: Reflect growth in confidence, empathy, and leadership.
- Adult Focus Groups: Report enhanced purpose and fulfillment through student mentorship.
- Growth in business and community partnerships
- Rotary Meetings: Used for ongoing program evaluation and adaptation.
- Higher engagement across social media and district communications.
- Positive stakeholder feedback from surveys and partner testimonials.

Behavioral Impact:

- Students improved professional communication and collaboration skills through consistent engagement with adult mentors across diverse settings.
- Adults developed stronger community ties and renewed civic engagement, often describing the experience as deeply meaningful and purpose-driven.
- Many students, particularly those without grandparents or older family members, gained exposure to intergenerational mentorship for the first time. These relationships offer emotional support, practical advice, and guidance as students prepare for postsecondary pathways and career decisions.
- Adult participants frequently serve on mock interview panels at the district office, helping students practice workplace readiness, refine resumes, and strengthen confidence.
- Several adults are invited as guest speakers in classrooms, sharing their professional journeys and life lessons that directly connect to AFHSD's career and technical education pathways.
- The mentorship connections often extend beyond the program year, with students maintaining relationships through college and early career milestones.
- Both generations report a greater sense of belonging and appreciation for the value of lifelong learning, empathy, and community service.

Results

- Full districtwide expansion to all five high schools, ensuring equitable access to students across Agua Fria, Canyon View, Desert Edge, Millennium, and Verrado. The program has become a unified effort representing the district's shared vision of community-integrated education.
- Consistent participant retention and satisfaction, with both student and adult waitlists demonstrating growing demand and excitement. Surveys reveal that over 90% of participants plan to re-engage or recommend the experience to others.
- Formalized leadership and communication structures now include Family Leaders, school site liaisons, and district oversight through the Communications and Community Initiatives Office, providing consistency and accountability.
- Local media and community recognition through *West Valley View*, *Community Connect*, and Rotary publications highlight the program's innovation and positive social impact.
- Expansion of mentorship beyond events: Students seek advice from adult participants on postsecondary goals, scholarship essays, and job readiness, reflecting authentic relationship building.
- Integration with curriculum and CTE initiatives: Adult participants contribute as guest speakers and mock interview panelists, reinforcing workforce readiness and leadership development.
- Creation of a legacy network: Alumni students and returning adults are being engaged to mentor new participants, ensuring continuity and long-term sustainability.
- Community-wide ripple effect: The program has inspired neighboring districts and civic organizations to explore similar initiatives, positioning AFHSD as a regional model for intergenerational engagement.

The Senior to Senior Program exemplifies the power of education and community working together to create transformational, intergenerational connections that prepare students for life and foster a culture of empathy, gratitude, and mutual respect.

Future Goals

1. Growth to reach more retirees in our community.
2. Implement data tracking tools to analyze student/adult engagement outcomes.

Logo Design & Meaning

The Senior to Senior logo, developed collaboratively by Agua Fria High School District's Communications Department and student leaders, visually represents the heart of the program: connection, compassion, and community. The design features two stylized figures, one in deep navy blue and the other in warm red, standing side by side with one figure's arm gently placed around the other's shoulder. This simple yet powerful gesture embodies the program's essence: support, mentorship, and unity across generations.

The use of AFHSD's official colors reinforces the district's identity and commitment to belonging, while the bold, modern typeface communicates strength and inclusivity. The figures' mirrored forms symbolize equality between student and adult participants, each learning from and enriching the other. Together, the imagery conveys compassion, relationship growth, and the transformational bonds that occur when generations come together in shared purpose.

This logo, used on shirts, signage, and event materials, has become a recognized emblem of kindness and collaboration within the West Valley community. It stands as a visual reminder that every interaction in the program celebrates empathy, mentorship, and lifelong connection.

Scroll Banner



Logo Variations



Newsletter Feature



Apparel



Supporting Evidence

Included Attachments:

- [Senior to Senior Logos](#)
- [Student survey results \(Year 2022-23, Year 2023-24, Year 2024-25\)](#).
- [Video testimonials from participants and Rotary partners](#)
 - [2023/24](#)
 - [2024/25](#)
- [Press Release to West Valley View](#)
- [Community Connect QR Recruitment Campaign](#)
- [Community Connect Cultivating Community Article](#)
- [Photos and event stills from 2022-2025 program events](#)



West Valley View 

Summary Statement

The Senior to Senior Program celebrates learning as a lifelong, shared journey. By bridging generations through connection and service, Agua Fria Union High School District has created a living model of educational excellence, community engagement, and human connection that continues to grow year after year.

Total Participants: 80+ (students and adults combined)

Program Duration: 2022-Present

Award Category: Comprehensive Public Relations Program



Contact Information



Melinda Marchese

Director of Communications & Community Initiatives

Agua Fria High School District

(623) 932-7033

mmarchese@aguafria.org

Superintendent

Mark Yslas

Agua Fria High School District

Community Lead

Mary Kay Utecht

PebbleCreek Rotary

