

Group gets its hands on schools

TribTown • Nonprofit sets volunteers to repairing, repainting the district's old buildings

By Jennifer Anderson

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With all the doom and gloom news about Portland Public Schools' aging and crumbling buildings lately due to deferred maintenance, most people never would know there was a concerted effort under way to spruce up many of them.

Last summer, the district invested \$32,000 in a contract with the nonprofit volunteer organization Hands On Greater Portland for a variety of school improvement projects citywide.

Now, with several months still to go, the organization has completed about \$300,000 worth of improvements through various projects, and brought another \$50,000 in in-kind contributions to the schools.

Willie Poinsette, the district's chief of Student, Family and School Support, said the partnership has been a no-brainer.

"The district is getting so much more than we're putting out," she said. "They're able to leverage their resources out there, and also have the expertise to manage the projects, work with volunteers, work with our facilities folks and determine the need."

In October, Humboldt School in North Portland got its walls painted and its garden plot revitalized by 200 Hands On volunteers, using \$25,000 worth of in-kind donations from Home Depot.

Sitton School and Ockley Green School, both in North Portland, also were painted last fall with the organization's help.

In January, Hands On worked with Kaiser Permanente to bring a group of 80 volunteers to Richmond School in Southeast Portland to paint 18,900 square feet of hallways, a job for which a private contractor might have charged \$100,000.

A recent day of service at Vernon School in Northeast Portland attracted 600 volunteers, two times more than expected, said Andrew Nelson, Hands On's executive director.

"The No. 1 issue, if you ask the mayoral candidates, is the schools," Nelson said. "So many volunteers are interested in the schools. The trick, though, has been finding real-time, doable projects for volunteers. I think that's been the win for us."

Poinsette added that while many of the volunteers have kids in the public schools, others don't, so bringing them into the district's buildings also is a great way to market the schools.

Hands On linked 14,000 volunteers with projects last year, Nelson said, and sees its network growing each year. In August, the organization will organize the district's annual Community Care Day, placing people in volunteer opportunities during a citywide morning of school improvement projects.

While Nelson said he's happy the volunteer bug is spreading, he's careful to note: "It's not just about numbers, it's about making sure people have a good experience and are fired up to do it again."

For information, see handsonportland.org.

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