



Green Sense 11/24/13

## **Coolidge Courtyard Project**

The 52 sixth-graders of Team Explorer at Coolidge Middle School are learning that it takes a community to green a school. With encouragement from their teacher, a little help from the Reading Climate Advisory Committee, and incredible support from Home Depot, they are revitalizing a rundown courtyard.

Early in September, Coolidge math and science teacher, Andrea Bruno, took her students into the courtyard to practice the scientific skill of observation. Some of what the kids observed included flower beds and stone pavers overgrown with weeds, dead shrubbery, and a deteriorating triangular art structure perched on a bed of rocks. The paint was peeling on four wooden benches. It wasn't pretty.

Ms. Bruno asked her students if they wanted to make it better. They did. They formed committees and began brainstorming. They wanted colorful plants, benches freshly painted in Reading's school colors, red and black. They envisioned a clean, bright, inviting patch of the outdoors where students could enjoy homeroom games, quiet reading and hands-on science and math lessons. They started small – pulling weeds, sweeping, and raking to clean up the space.

Concurrently, the Reading Climate Committee was looking for a way to bring "Green Apple Day of Service" to Reading. Green Apple Day of Service is an initiative of the US Green Building Council's Center for Green Schools. Launched in 2012, its aim is to bring students, teachers, parents, business owners, local government officials and community volunteers together each fall with service projects to make schools healthier and more environmentally sustainable places to work, learn and play.

When approached by the committee, Coolidge Principal Sarah Marchant was supportive. She encouraged her staff to engage their homeroom students in environmental projects and to contact the committee if they wanted assistance recruiting adult volunteers, obtaining supplies, or publicizing their efforts. Ms. Bruno took advantage of this offer and discussed the courtyard project with Climate Advisory Committee Chair, Joan Boegel.

Joan went to the Reading Home Depot with a request for donations of plants, paint and tools. Store Manager Carmen Fulchini responded positively, saying, "This will be fun; this is just the kind of project we like to get involved with."

A few days later, Michele Cataldo, Supervisor of Home Depot's Garden Department, called to say that - in addition to donating materials - they would like to send a crew of Home Depot employee volunteers to help. Next, Carmen and Michele visited Andrea Bruno and her students at Coolidge. Together, they scoped out the project. The students had creative ideas and lots of enthusiasm.

With her landscaping expertise, Michele recommended perennial and annual plants for each area of the courtyard and taught the kids about the soil, light and water requirements for each plant. They agreed that Home Depot volunteers would spend a Saturday tackling some of the larger tasks that might be beyond the capabilities of sixth-graders.

At 7 a.m. on October 19, nine Home Depot employees arrived with ladders, rakes, shovels, wheelbarrows, power tools and plants. For eight hours, they trimmed tree branches, removed the faded triangle structure and boulders, spread gravel and mulch, transplanted viable shrubs, uprooted dead plants and replaced them with beautiful purple flowers and bright red pepper plants.

On Monday morning, the students were thrilled to see how their courtyard had been transformed. Now it's up to them to maintain the space. Equipped with tools and garden gloves supplied by Home Depot, the kids have been watering, weeding, planting flower bulbs and planning the next phase of their project.

Home Depot has promised to return in the spring to build a deck and install benches for an outdoor classroom. They will also donate more plants, help the students conduct soil tests, and provide low VOC paint for the benches.

Ms. Bruno says that Home Depot has been a "terrific partner". Her students were amazed at how generous Home Depot has been with time and supplies. They look forward to continuing to work with and learn from their new friends. Store Manager Carmen Fulchini explains that Home Depot strives to be a good corporate citizen. It is clear that they truly care about the Reading community, our schools and our children.

A column by Reading Climate Committee member Joan Boegel