

## One day a year isn't too much to give to schools

As one of the principals in S & J Heating & Air Conditioning Inc. in Canby, Sheri Renhard works long, hard hours. But the two most satisfying hours she puts in each week are ones she isn't paid for. That's when she's over at Canby High School, serving as a volunteer career counselor.

Renhard, a major proponent of adult involvement in the schools, says: "The education of our children is our responsibility. The schools are just an educational resource."

Renhard thinks that responsibility is something every S & J employee ought to help shoulder. That's why she and her husband, Joseph, decided to add a new personal day to their small-business benefits package. Now, every S & J employee has the right to take eight hours off work a year to spend in the classroom, working with kids.

That may not sound like a lot of time. But according to at least one study, most adults, and 40 percent of parents, never attend school programs. In eight hours, an adult can get a fair picture of what a kid does during a typical school day. And once adults find that kids and teachers love having them around, many get hooked. Next thing you know, they're using personal and vacation days to volunteer in the classroom.

Experiences like Renhard's are one of the reasons The Urban League of Portland and Children First for Oregon are promoting a fledgling program they call "8 for Kids." What these two groups are trying to do is convince employers here to add a personal day a year to their employee benefits package, an 8-hour unit which workers can use to go back to school—as tutors, helpers, field trip chaperones or just observers. Anything to get them personally involved in the schools.

"The overall goal of '8 for Kids' is to get businesses to pledge or commit to adopting any family-friendly policies or practices that provide the support for employees to participate in a child's education," says Rose Yuska, Children First's point person for "8 for Kids" and project manager for the local "Hand in Hand" project created by Mattel Inc. to encourage adult involvement in K-12 classrooms.

Yuska thinks it is important for more employers to follow S & J's policy of creating the day a year specifically for school participation. At a recent brainstorming session with executives from employers like Providence Health Systems, Wells Fargo & Co., NW Natural and Sedgwick of Oregon, and, of course, Sheri Renhard from S & J, it became clear that establishing the one day a year for educational participation would, for some employers, be more difficult than one might imagine.

"There's a lot of interest in this kind of program at the middle levels in organizations," says Don Brown, director of the Providence Academy at Providence Health Systems. "Whether that interest will carry through at the CEO level, I don't know."

Brown and others at the July 14 meet-



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ing agreed that, in theory, "8 for Kids" was a great idea. First, would it give a taste of classroom participation to thousands of area employees who have never taken part in the education of young people. But over the long term, they could see it creating a legion of public school advocates who might attend school board meetings, volunteer for school positions, and work together to help pass funding issues or collect money for school supplies.

But getting employers to go along is another matter. Brown points out that Providence already has programs in place which allow employees to take part in their children's education. "I think we'd support this kind of program. But would we be willing to make it part of our policy? I don't know."

Isaac Regenstreif, a communications specialist with PacifiCorp who spends many days a year volunteering in the schools, said it might be a tough sell at PacifiCorp, too.

"We're already very involved here with START (a reading tutorial program)," he says. "It's one of those things where it's a little bit of my time, a little bit of the company's time. PacifiCorp is very good about it. But I don't think we have a specific policy on school involvement."

In addition to his tutoring assignment, Regenstreif spent a lot of his own hours as a volunteer in his daughter's second grade classroom last year. And he says that sort of involvement offers a very different sort of experience from what he and the students get from START.

"My kid really liked it, and for me, it gave me a real good feel for the curriculum and a good sense of what the kids were doing," he says. He thinks most adults will get hooked on the experience if they're given the chance to spend some time in the classroom.

Carrie Eisenbrandt, another attendee at the July 14 skull session, thinks companies will reap almost immediate benefits if they get behind "8 for Kids."

"A lot of the problem with this kind of program is that it's easy for managers to say they're taking time off to spend in their kids' classrooms, but it's harder for people at lower levels to get away and do it," says Eisenbrandt, human resources vice president for Sedgwick of Oregon. "If you give them the day and have managers present it properly in a positive way, they see it as a real benefit. It shows you're willing to be flexible with them. For companies like ours, which can't offer fabulous stock options and so on, it gives us something we can offer when we're competing for talent."

Yuska would like to have 100 companies commit to "8 for Kids" by year-end. She may be shooting high. But her feeling is she'd rather have fewer companies sign on than water down the concept by adding options and "menu items" that give employees less, rather than more, flexibility to get back to the classroom.

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