

[Education Week's blogs](#) > [Independent Schools, Common Perspectives](#)

In Praise of Building-and-Grounds Staffs Everywhere

By Peter Gow on July 22, 2013 7:56 AM | [No comments](#)

I spent a fine morning last week shooting the breeze in the office of Stephen Broadwell, superintendent of the [Willsboro Central School District](#) in upstate New York. Kindred spirits, we talked serious shop, shared a few war stories, and had a look around the school, a thoughtfully and pleasingly designed single building serving about 300 kids in grades Pre-K through 12.

At another point I'll ruminate more on our conversation, but the tour got me to thinking about another side of school life. At one point we stopped by a classroom whose floor was gleaming with newly applied wax, and I suddenly remembered where I had seen that gleam before. It was at Southside Elementary, my grade school back in the fifties; it made me wonder whether there is a special New York State standard in wax application, because the notably shiny floors at Southside brightened the start of each new school year, even if they also reflected the receding glow of summer.

It was hot that day, but Willsboro Central's buildings and grounds crew were hard at it, cutting grass, moving stuff around in the endless way things must be moved in the summer, and polishing those floors. The building looked pristine.

Once upon a time I was part of such crews. I first labored as a tween in indentured servitude to my father at his school (as he had been to his father before him) and then shoveled sand as a summer kid on a college maintenance crew. Later I parlayed my expertise at pushing a lawnmower and emptying trash barrels into work at a few summer camps, where later my ability to back a trailer got me drafted, oddly, as sailing staff.

I worked with a lot of great people, and since that time I have encountered many more. What just about all of them have had in common, a virtue I suspect we on the academic side of the house don't always recognize, is an extraordinary pride in their work and in their schools. John Heiss and the other "custodians" made Southside shine and kept its sidewalks clear in winter and its playgrounds green from May to October; Jess Porter and Curt Fraser, working essentially alone much of the time, kept my father's school looking green and gorgeous. The crews at every school I have worked at knock themselves out to keep the places sparkling. At my current school, for example, I am always bowled over by the preternatural skill the building and grounds guys have for aligning rows of desks and chairs; I couldn't do half as well with a laser. This, and keeping a ninety-year-old building feeling always like new.

Ask these men and women why they work so hard and take such care in their efforts, and nine times out of ten they'll tell you it's for the school, for the kids, for the program. They understand their duty--yes, that--is pretty much that of the stage crew of a Broadway theater: to make sure that the show, the school program (innovative or traditional, makes no difference), goes off without a technical or environmental hitch.

This pride, I suspect, crosses all educational sectors, all school sizes, all community types. Sometimes working understaffed and probably just about always working on tight if not strangled budgets (and thus probably often

underpaid), buildings and grounds crews are unsung heroes of the educational programs we deliver. They may sometimes be invisible to us in our classrooms and offices, but they are watching--watching us, watching the kids, looking for ways to make our lives go a little more smoothly.

In independent schools, where missions and values matter, we owe it to our conceptions of ourselves and of what we do to acknowledge the men and women who support our work in ways that seem peripheral until the blizzard comes or the water system fails. Often enough our students "get it," and thankfully they quickly discover wisdom and knowledge in some of our B&G colleagues that we don't recognize. If our schools purport to be families, as many do, they are essential and committed family members.

So whether your school features New York State-style gleaming linoleum or polished paneling on chapel walls, asphalt courtyards or acres of greensward, when school starts in a few weeks take a moment to contemplate and appreciate the men and women--and sometimes the summer kids--who have made it a point of pride that the school look "just so" when the kids stream back and what we consider the "real" work of the school begins. It's their real work year-round, in rain and shine, and they do it for us.

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