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PHOTO BY CERVANTE POPE/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Incoming eighth grader Ruebens Francois gets a helping hand on his first day back to school at Ockley Green Middle School in north Portland from adult mentors from Portland's Coalition of Black Men, Chairman Ralph Evans (left), and former executive director Bruce Watts.

Youth Mentoring from the Start

BY CERVANTE POPE
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Portland's Coalition of Black Men has long sought to change both the perception young black males give and the quality of life they have by connecting with them early on in life through mentoring and positive influence.

The group was formed 28 years ago at time when media coverage in Portland was dominated by negative depictions of young members of the black community and when work was needed to combat a gang problem that was developing in the city, according to Bruce Watts, the group's former executive director and

Coalition of Black Men making a difference for 28 years

current member.

"The Coalition was created to provide a positive image of African American men in the city," Watts says.

Having worked with the Coalition since it was founded in 1988, Watts sees the beneficial impact the mentoring program has achieved.

"We have made a difference and we can tell," Watts says of the many kids of

color who have benefited. "We try to expose them to opportunities in life that they may not realize are there."

Watts said a recent partnership with Portland Public Schools, ushered in by former superintendent Carole Smith, has made the coalition's work even more impactful.

Smith wasn't pleased with the "glaring discrepancy" Portland schools had in its

discipline of African American male students, Watts says. Youth of color were experiencing suspensions and expulsions at a much higher rate than their white classmates, which led to the superintendent calling for at least a 50 percent decrease in the number of incidents causing this disciplinary discrepancy.

Many of the issues known for landing African American students in helms of the district's punitive disciplinary policies were falling under the guise of "defiant or disruptive behavior" – a description that is more subjective than definitive, Watts

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