

Students work to clean up Falls City public spaces

After-school program pays youths to keep library, schools, community center looking spiffy

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

FALLS CITY — If the schools, library and other public spaces around Falls City are looking tidier, thank eight students collectively referred to as “the work force crew.”

Those students are employed for landscaping maintenance around the school district through the Family Academic Community and Enrichment for Success, or FACES, after-school program.

Alex Ogden oversees the crew and would like to see it clean up around the Falls City Community Center and pressure wash the staircase between Prospect Street and downtown before school ends next week.

They’ve already worked around the Wagner Community Library, Falls City High School, the high school gym and Falls City Elementary School.

“We’ve been getting a lot of good, positive feedback,” Ogden said.

That includes from his boss, Amy Houghtaling, the FACES director, who bragged on the crew at a recent Falls City School Board meeting.

“I would like to highlight, again, the work force crew doing work around the schools,” she said during her monthly report. “They are working their tails off and doing a great job.”

The program, which is paid for through a grant from Polk County, was designed to hire five students for the crew.

Houghtaling said FACES hired all eight who applied because they aced the interviews.

The first task was purchasing outdoor work appropriate gear, including heavy work boots, gloves and bright neon vests.



Delaina Faulconer, left, clears weeds and other debris near the playground at Falls City Elementary School.

JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-Observer

Community members are supporting the crew.

Amy Tucker, owner of Id-dell Dew Gardens nursery, helped students learn the difference between weeds and beneficial plants.

Auto repair shop owner Mike McConnell taught them basic repair on lawn mowers and other landscaping equipment.

Houghtaling said the crew is intended to be like a first job, teaching basic work skills, responsibility and teamwork.

Students earn class credit and get paid for their time, which consists of a couple of hours after school and six hours on Fridays, when school is not normally in session.

Two crews will be hired with the grant this year, one during the spring and another this fall.



Supervisor Alex Ogden watches as three crew members remove shrub roots.

JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-Observer

Phoenix Brown, who has worked with the school district’s summer group with

the maintenance department, said she applied because she likes working on

the types of projects the crew takes on.

“I worked over the sum-

mer, doing outside work and inside work,” Brown said. “I like coming back to school and seeing it nice and clean and seeing we can make a difference in Falls City and make it look better.”

Brittney Potts agreed, saying the crew demonstrates that the city’s teens take pride in cleaning up their community.

Brown and Potts said they like the presentations, especially those on maintaining equipment.

“I think it can help us in real-world situations and in life,” Potts said. “If we need to fix something, we don’t have to rely on someone else. We can do it ourselves. I think it’s a big step in us becoming adults.”

Other crew members, Brian Youtz, Katy Byce, and Delaina Faulconer, said the crew is teaching them important lessons about being on time, prepared, and organized, and managing their time well.

All participants must be in good standing in their classes.

Team work is necessary, too, as the members of the crew found out when they had to put collective effort into digging out the roots of a shrub, which were stubborn and required shovels, an ax, and plenty of pushing and pulling on the part of Zach Varney, Kobe Smith, and Daniel Boone.

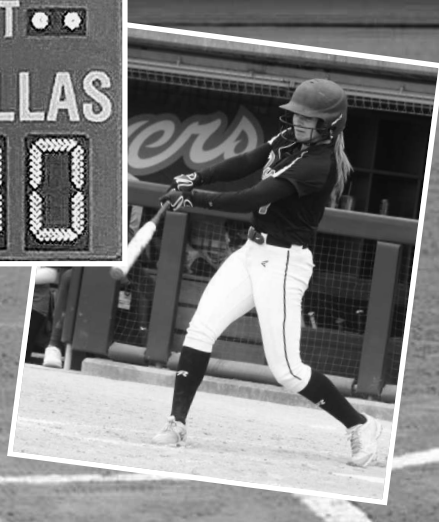
Ogden kept a watchful eye and gave them tips when they got stuck.

Eventually they dug it out — and held it up like a trophy.

Ogden said the goal is not just a paycheck or class credit, but something that can help set them up for success after high school.

“This is a big thing to help build their resume, so when they get out of school they have a little something already,” he said.

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