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The main public high school in Lowell, built in 1930, and the elementary constructed in 1940, are in the midst of a makeover.

Starting as soon as school let out in June, construction at Lowell High and Lundy Elementary has encompassed the hard work of volunteers, detail by contractor G2 Construction, and Cool Schools grant funding as part of a multi-year project to upgrade schools to be more suitable for students' education.

According to Lowell district superintendent Walt Hanline, rather than tearing down the whole building and replacing it with a new one, the district elected to spruce up the existing structures.

"The whole focus of this building is to restore it to its historical context." Hanline said. "The windows have all been replaced in both schools...by next week all this (outside) will be white with red trim."

The project this summer included replacing all the windows, insulation, and upgrading the heating system, as Cool Schools grants encouraged environmentally friendly and energy – efficient solutions.

Lowell School district received the grant in two parts: one for about \$520,000 and the other for \$902,000. Fall Creek Nursery also donated to the project, Hanline said.

According to the Oregon Department of Education website, 'Cool Schools' launched in 2011 with the goals of putting money back into the classroom (as utility bills are sharply increasing), boost student and teacher performance, and get Oregonians back to work. It started with energy audits for 500 Oregon schools, and through 2015, the Oregon Dept. of Energy will help the selected public schools find low-cost solutions.

The improvements in the district aren't just in construction, however, as Hanline and Lowell High School principal Kay Graham say that the educational curriculum is also undergoing change. At the elementary, Lundy and new charter school Mountain View Academy will be in the same spaces, encouraging "friendly competition," Hanline said.

Overall, the building improvements cost about \$1.9 million total, including the grant funding. In this case, it would have been significantly more expensive to replace the schools with new buildings instead of renovating the current ones, Hanline said.

The district also plans to offer after-school tutoring to help working parents get their kids the help they need, especially with new Common Core curriculums, and increasingly difficult state and federal achievement standards.

“The theme is that we’re on the move,” Hanline said. “We have big things going on in this community.”

Why the jump-start in building upgrades and academic overhaul? Graham says it reflects a changing attitude and the positive influence of staff, especially as six new hires prepare to hit the ground running this year -- some new educational methods include writing approaches at Lundy Elementary and a new math curriculum in grades 6 to 12.

“This school board is one of the finest I’ve ever worked with,” Graham said. “They really care about what happens here; they’re smart. It’s been great to work with them.”

Additionally, Graham praised staff members as some of the best educators she’d worked with – and she’s been a part of several school districts in her career.

“I’m working with (whom) I think are rock stars at this point,” Graham added. “I’m just really excited to see what’s going to happen this year.”