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REAL SCHOOL GARDENS, TARRANT COUNTY JUVENILE SERVICES PARTNERSHIP BENEFITS YOUTH

Fort Worth, Texas – *[July 22, 2008]* – A partnership between REAL School Gardens and Tarrant County Juvenile Services gives juvenile offenders another chance to be productive members of society, while also providing an opportunity to gain valuable life skills and discover the wonders of nature.

For the last three summers, youth participating in TCJS' Community Services Restitution program have helped maintain school gardens supported by RSG to meet their community service obligations.

CSR is a program in which youth aged 14-17 engage in community service with a local non-profit community agency, educational or government facility. CSR's goal is to help young people accept responsibility for the actions that led to their sentencing and learn to be engaged in their communities.

TCJS Juvenile Probation Officer Michael Warren says about 200 participate in the program during the summer months. But they're not just pulling weeds. In addition to maintaining the gardens, they are also learning more about nature and its impact on their world through presentations from RSG Resource Coordinator Eric Vanderbeck and other supporters of RSG's mission.

"We're providing an educational opportunity along with offering a community service option," Warren said. "It's not just about meeting the obligations."

Warren also sees the community service option provided through RSG not as punishment, but a unique opportunity for self-improvement and a way to break the cycle of recidivism. "They learn that they have to show up on time, pay attention and ask questions – to be engaged, which are some of the basic skills a person needs to succeed in life."

The educational component of the program includes presentations by Vanderbeck on a variety of topics, from geology to biology, as well as lessons in observation. He also shares his wealth of knowledge about the different varieties of plants and their potential uses through lessons in ethnobotany, the scientific study of the traditional classification and uses of plants in different human societies. Teens in the program have learned how crushed seed from the Western Soap Berry tree and the herb rosemary make an antibacterial hand cleanser, among other lessons.

A typical session begins with getting-to-know-you activities and then each teen is given a journal to use for recording ideas, thoughts or dates, which provides a structure for learning basic organizational skills.

One activity has the group applying geo-caching techniques to find a hidden “treasure” using GPS technology to identify a location using latitude and longitude. Before the group arrives at the site, Vanderbeck “hides” a small token in the garden for them to locate.

After they find the object, the teens work alongside Vanderbeck in the school garden, performing basic maintenance while he discusses what different plants are used for and their history to keep the teens engaged.

For some of the participants, this is a first experience in being successful and learning to trust. After one young teen found his token, a small pewter tadpole symbolizing transformation, he said, “I’m going to keep this with me and remember.”

In another lesson, Vanderbeck taught group participants how to make fire without using matches. Not only did they learn how to make a fire, Warren said they also employed hand to eye coordination and received an important lesson in persistence and patience.

Warren praised the RSG mission and the innovative opportunities it provides youth in the CSR program. “They (RSG) are really on the cutting edge of education and innovation with their programs in area schools,” he said. “Some of the kids in our program have talked about wanting to start their own gardens since taking part in this community service project.”

Vanderbeck’s hopes for his “All Stars,” as program participants are called, is that they understand the earth has something to offer them and that the community service work they perform is their positive mark on the community.

“I want them to know that by doing what they are doing (through the CSR program), they are leaving behind a positive legacy, and that’s honorable,” he said.

About REAL School Gardens

The mission of REAL School Gardens is to cultivate relationships with elementary school communities to create learning gardens that raise hope, spark imaginations and connect children to nature. Currently, RSG works with approximately 1,000 educators and more than 22,000 students in 40 elementary schools in North Texas, with plans to reach more students and school communities across the country. On the Internet, visit RSG at www.realschoolgardens.org.

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