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RECORD NUMBER PARTICIPATE IN REAL SCHOOL GARDENS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Fort Worth, Texas – [August 7, 2008] – A record number of educators from area school districts that partner with REAL School Gardens participated in the organization’s most recent professional development session, which focused on increasing outdoor learning experiences for students.

Approximately 200 participating teachers heard from expert presenters and engaged in discussion forums and panels during the Aug. 7 session, titled “Metamorphosis: Nature Transforming Lives Transforming Nature,” held at Goodman Elementary in Arlington. The group also enjoyed breakfast and lunch provided by RSG.

Participants also had the option to attend a six-hour pre-conference to deepen understanding of the concept of inquiry education.

“Our main focus was to increase learning opportunities outside and give teachers that attended the tools they need to teach kids outside,” said Scott Feille, program director for RSG and one of the presenters for the program.

RSG’s professional development is coordinated by the Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT), the RSG Professional Development Leadership Team and the RSG’s ACORN Advisory Board.

The workshop featured four emphasis areas, or “strands” including Changes in Nature; Content Deepening through Gardening; Student and Teacher Transformation; and School Transformation, with each including sessions led by teachers trained in previous RSG professional development courses.

Session topics include how to get a garden started; planting and design elements of gardens; using gardens as a key element in school-wide projects; how administrators and support staff can use a school garden; and deepening connections to and overcoming fears of nature, among other topics.

Presenters included Genifer Best, Donnette Durham, Kelly Feille, Sharon Chastain and Scott Feille of the Fort Worth Independent School District; Stacey Hodge, Leah Rios, Melodie Minshew-Bourassa, Kate Middlemas and Hanan Fares, East Fort Worth Montessori Academy; Carmen Perez, Christina Castruita, Hildelisa Diaz and Jo Ann Collins, Arlington Independent School District; Nancy Burleson, Birdville Independent School District; and Eric Vanderbeck, REAL School Gardens Resource Coordinator.

Feille said RSG's professional development includes content, management techniques, and modeling of best teaching practices with regard to inquiry learning. Input from those attending is also a key factor in how the professional development programs are developed.

"The shape and style of our professional development is based on feedback, so we look for meaningful ways for them to provide us with that in order to help us move forward," he said.

An art specialist at the Alice Carlson Applied Learning Center in Fort Worth, Genifer Best is in her second year as a presenter for RSG professional development. She was part of a group that received training at the Teton Science School in Jackson, Wyo. to prepare for as an instructor with RSG, where she learned the principles of place-based education.

"The philosophy of place-based instruction is to get children to begin caring about the things closest to them, even if it's just a small plot of land in their backyard," she said.

"As they mature, our hope is that their sphere of interest will expand beyond that small plot of land and into the larger world of nature to be good stewards of the environment, whether it's a rain forest or their own backyard."

Best's instruction session for teachers in RSG professional development features innovative lesson plans that include creating biodegradable rocks for children, "surprise stones" made from old coffee grounds and using windows to display colorful depictions of the natural habitats of frogs and toads. Such projects help connect art and science and are easy for teachers who may not have an art background, she said.

"I want teachers to become "fearless" about bringing nature into their classrooms and making it an integral part of their instruction plans," she said.

Janet Latham, a librarian at W.S. Ryan Elementary in Denton, participated in the RSG professional development and came away impressed with the quality of the presentations and with the work of RSG. "I went there looking for ideas for our OLE and came away with a plethora of ideas, and I'm looking forward to implementing them," she said.

Jeanne McCarty, executive director of RSG, said she and her staff are dedicated to making its professional development programs useful and meaningful for participants and the students they teach. "We're committed to making these workshops enjoyable, welcoming and supportive experiences for the teachers who participate, because we honor the important work they do every day for our children," McCarty said.

For more information about REAL School Gardens and its professional development opportunities for educators, call Charlotte Sassman at 817.348.8102 or e-mail csassman@realschoolgarden.org.

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 1,280 educators and more than 28,000 students in 56 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