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RETREAT AT REAL SCHOOL GARDENS HEADQUARTERS TO PROVIDE GARDEN DESIGN TRAINING, WELCOME FOR NEW SCHOOL PARTNERS

Fort Worth, Texas – *[September 20, 2008]* – REAL School Gardens welcomes four new school partners with a garden site evaluation and design training retreat this weekend, Sept. 19-20, at its headquarters.

Veda Knox Elementary of the Arlington School District; Birdville Elementary and David E. Smith Elementary of the Birdville School District; and Hubbard Heights Elementary of the Fort Worth Independent School District were chosen because of their commitment to including outdoor learning experiences in their curriculum.

“We’re thrilled to have these new schools join us in our mission to connect children with nature and the abundance of learning opportunities it provides,” said Jeanne McCarty, executive director of RSG.

The weekend retreat will include a full slate of activities and hands-on training opportunities for teachers and school administrators, including site and design evaluation, strategies for garden stewardship and how to engage school constituents in the process. The goal of the organizers of the retreat is for teachers to then take what they have learned back to their school communities to initiate the process of establishing a garden.

Guidance and mentoring will be provided by REAL School Garden staff, volunteers and others who support the organization’s mission, with the goal of helping these schools have their gardens established by spring 2009.

Kerry Renta, a fifth grade teacher and landscape designer who has been helping RSG for the last year by providing training for its partner schools, will be on hand this weekend to provide instruction and share his skills with those participating in the retreat.

The focus of Renta’s instruction will be site inventory and analysis, he said, using the outdoor space at RSG’s fire station headquarters as a model. Renta will also address such topics as how to collect an information inventory in determining a garden site, including sun exposure, drainage and existing vegetation, among other issues, and the tools needed to gather that data.

“They’ll take what they’ve learned back to their students and give them the opportunity to have a hand in choosing the garden site,” he said. “I’ll also talk about the timeline for establishing the garden, and what they can expect in terms of support from RSG.”

Renta said that the garden component in the curriculum also allows instructors too see “a part of a student that you don’t see in the classroom.” “Think about the motivational part of this for the kids. Sometimes it’s hard to be motivated about subjects involving nature when they’re sitting in chairs inside, but they have a natural curiosity about what happens when they go outside.”

The reverse is also true about their teacher, he said, laughing. “When I’m outside, I’m happy, and when I’m happy everyone else is happy.”

Some of the feedback Renta has received included from one student who told him that “when we’re in the garden, you see it (instruction about nature) happen and you remember it better.” Another one of his students, when asked what the garden meant to her, replied that she had become “more of an outside person” and was now helping her mother work in their garden.

“We also talk about how healthy foods come from the garden, and even the spiritual aspect of it, how it has a calming effect.”

Victor Musasia, a former student at Fitzgerald Elementary School where he enjoyed the benefits of a school garden, concurs with Renta. “Our garden there was so beautiful, serene and calm,” he said. “I liked being there to relax and chill.”

Now a student at Ferguson Junior High School, Musasia spoke at the welcoming ceremony for the retreat, where he expressed his gratitude to supportive moms and dads for their work with the gardens. “I thanked them for the big part they’ve played in teaching us about the beauty of nature,” 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 1,200 educators and more than 22,000 students in more than 50 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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