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ROSENOW DISCUSSES BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING, WORK OF RSG AT REAL PEOPLE COMMUNITY MEETING

Fort Worth, Texas – [October 2, 2008] – Children engaged in outdoor learning experiences don't just become more knowledgeable about plants and how they grow. They're also less likely to develop inappropriate anti-social behaviors or experience health challenges that can undermine their chances for success.

Those are just some of the conclusions based on research and observations shared by Nancy Rosenow, executive director of Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, during her presentation Oct. 2 at REAL School Gardens' REAL People Community Meeting, held at Alice Carlson Applied Learning Center.

REAL School Gardens is a non-profit organization devoted to establishing gardens in elementary schools across the nation, with the goal of connecting young children with nature. More than 200 people, including REAL School Gardens staff, area educators, master gardeners, parents and student volunteers attended the event.

Dimensions works in collaboration with the Arbor Day Foundation on a national initiative known as Nature Explore, a program designed to help children re-connect with the natural world as a key part of daily learning. Rosenow and a team of national consultants have established Nature Explore outdoor classrooms in schools across the country, providing nature experiences that are transforming communities and energizing students and teachers.

"There is compelling research showing the benefits of bringing gardens to schools," she said. "The benefits go beyond academics. We're seeing that taking care of plants and watching something grow is countering the negative influences in the lives of children."

According to Rosenow, outdoor learning helps children reap social as well as emotional benefits, such as gaining a sense of empathy and a caretaking attitude toward their environment that can counter violent and aggressive tendencies. And in sharp contrast to the fast-paced world they live in, children are slowing down to focus on details and concentrating through doing close observation with their work in gardens.

"We're seeing kids gain a sense of delayed gratification and patience by working in gardens, and learning the value of real work," she said. "That's real positive."

School gardens can also counteract the rise in childhood obesity and diabetes by offering physical activity and important knowledge about healthy foods. "Children involved in growing vegetables are more likely to eat them and therefore improve their diet," she said.

“Excessive amounts of time spent indoors watching television, playing video games or other sedentary activities has led to a disconnection with the outside world and a rise in attention-deficit disorder, autism, obesity and depression among children,” she said. “We’re not against those activities, but we’re for trying to strike a balance.”

Nature Explore and REAL School Gardens provide learning experiences that are transformational not only for students, but educators as well. “Teachers in Los Angeles told me they were ready to leave the profession, but now with Nature Explore and the work of organizations like REAL School Gardens, they have hope again,” she said.

Dimensions is getting support through a partnership with Keep America Beautiful that provides master gardeners and other volunteers for its projects. “We have a lot of connections with a lot of great organizations like Keep America Beautiful to help children get reconnected with nature again,” she said.

Rosenow hopes a partnership can also be developed with REAL School Gardens that can help the organization advance its goal of expanding its mission nationwide. “We can lean on their expertise and support team and share resources, including using our research team to collect information on how REAL School Gardens is impacting their partner schools,” she said. “What a wonderful potential partnership that could be.”

REAL School Gardens Program Director Scott Feille said Rosenow’s presentation validated the work of his organization and those affiliated with its partner schools. “What she shared with us was really affirming of what educators in our network are doing, not just with academics but also about how gardens and outdoor spaces are impacting the whole student by helping develop self-esteem and positive behaviors,” he said.

“She is an international leader in connecting children to nature, and I’m always impressed with the vision she has,” said Jeanne McCarty, Executive Director of REAL School Gardens, who came to know Rosenow through the Nature Action Collaborative for Children. “She has brought together people from around the world who believe this issue is important, because we’re seeing some of these same problems with children not just in the U.S. but all over the world.”

Another benefit of outdoor education Rosenow discussed was that children are starting to redefine what holds value to include the products of nature. “They’re getting excited about what they’ve grown (in gardens),” she said. “It’s compelling and exciting to see them realize that something doesn’t have to come from a store to be valuable.”

One of those children is Alice Carlson student India Wentz, 11, who helped greet participants at the event and took McCarty on a tour of the school and to see its garden, one that REAL School Gardens helped facilitate. Wentz had eagerly anticipated the chance to let McCarty and other guests know how much the garden meant to her and her school.

“I wanted to tell her that I knew about the plants in my section, and that I knew a lot about my garden and that we use it a lot,” she said.

Wentz said her favorite part of the school garden is the butterfly area, where she likes to sit and sketch pictures of flowers and the bugs landing on them. She also enjoys visiting the garden to see the blooms of different flowers, especially in the fall when the weather is cooler.

“Inside (the classroom) you can hear about it (nature) and see pictures, but with the garden you get the real deal and see what’s going on,” she said.