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REAL SCHOOL GARDENS EXPANDS INTO GRAND PRAIRIE SCHOOL DISTRICT *New Partner Schools Win National Recognition*

GRAND PRARIE, Texas – [Dec. 9, 2008] – Environmental education programs at two area elementary schools in a district that recently partnered with REAL School Gardens have been honored by an organization synonymous with preservation of our nation’s natural beauty.

Daniels Elementary and Dickinson Elementary Academy of the Grand Prairie Independent School District received first place awards in Keep America Beautiful’s 2008 competition among youth/school groups in the Environment Programs’ Litter Prevention and Waste Reduction/Conservation categories, respectively.

Tracy Hollis, a veteran educator with 26 years of service to the Grand Prairie ISD, said the awards validate the district’s national reputation for providing outstanding outdoor learning experiences. Three years ago, the district was named the “Go Green School District of the Nation.”

“We have a proud history of producing innovative environmental education programs in our district,” she said. “It’s nice to know that we are still achieving.”

Hollis said the partnership with REAL School Gardens will help the district maintain that reputation by bolstering its gardening education programs. Fifteen of the 25 elementary schools in the district have had some level of a gardening program for years, including at Dickinson and Daniels, she said.

“We wanted to strengthen those programs through networking, staff development and camaraderie, and REAL School Gardens provides that for us,” she said. “When we joined with them, we knew right away it was a wonderful fit.

Keep America Beautiful’s annual National Awards program honors businesses, youth groups, government agencies and nonprofit organizations for their work in beautification, community improvement, litter prevention, and waste reduction. Award winners were recognized at a luncheon Dec. 5 in Washington D.C.’s Omni Shoreham Hotel on the final day of the ‘Green is the Theme’ 55th national conference. Hollis attended the conference, along with four other GPISD teachers.

“We’re thrilled for the recognition these two schools have received, and honored to be their partner in their quest to not only foster respect for, but gain a greater understanding of our natural environment,” said REAL School Gardens Executive Director Jeanne McCarty.

In addition to learning more about nature through gardening programs supported by REAL School Gardens and the health benefits for students of working outside, Hollis credits these outdoor learning experiences with improvements she sees in students' performance in math and science.

"It's this interaction with nature that I believe validates what we're doing with REAL School Gardens, bringing full circle the knowledge and well-being students gain from participating in their programs."

Brenda Townsend, who serves as science and technology instructional specialist for Daniels Elementary Academy, said the award "reinforces that our efforts are paying off."

Like Hollis, Townsend sees the impact the district's relationship with REAL School Gardens is having on students. "First graders have fun working in the garden, but the experience for our fourth grade students is that it's not only fun, but it gives them a higher understanding of the importance of gardening," she said. "They've come to learn the impact it has through the production of oxygen and beautification of the landscape."

The school intends to expand its available garden space to its large playground area and is designing the expansion now, Townsend said.

Dickinson Elementary Principal Angela Lesley credited "great teachers and students" at the school for the award. She praised school librarian Melissa Forsythe for coming up with the vision three years ago for developing a school garden and REAL School Gardens for its help with professional development and other resources.

"Winning this award this year means a great deal to us. We work very hard to educate our students both academically and environmentally, and to stress the importance of recycling and the impact that it has on our community and world," Forsythe said.

In order to create environmentally responsible citizens, students need a connection to the natural world, Forsythe said, and Dickinson's partnership with REAL School Gardens is helping the school make that connection through its garden education program.

"Through REAL School Gardens, we have access to professional development and training and to a network of other teachers working to provide their students the same things we are: exciting hands-on learning which builds connections to the natural world," she said.

The Dickinson garden has been in place for more than three years and is mostly a perennial butterfly garden, with space for vegetables including tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, watermelon and a variety of herbs. "Our students absolutely love to go into the garden, whether it is to plant something, work on a science lesson, sit and read, or have lunch and observe their surroundings," Forsythe said.

"Recently, a second-grade student heading back to class after spending time in the garden said, 'This is just like going on a field trip without leaving the building.' She has a connection that will last, that we will build upon, and that will hopefully impact her decision-making for years to come."