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REAL SCHOOL GARDENS PREPS LOWERY ROAD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOR INSTALLATION OF A LEARNING GARDEN IN 2010

FORT WORTH, Texas — [December 9, 2009] — Parents, students and educators braved rainy, wintry weather at Lowery Road Elementary School in East Fort Worth on December 1, to make initial design plans for a new garden installation.

Lowery Road is one of six North Texas elementary schools recently selected for partnership with REAL School Gardens that will result in a new school garden installation in 2010. Thanks to this partnership, school participants will create an outdoor classroom between the school building and the portable units on the west lot. Other school partners selected for new school gardens include: I.M. Terrell Elementary and T.A. Sims Elementary of the Fort Worth Independent School District, Thurgood Marshall Elementary and Hobbs Williams Elementary of the Grand Prairie Independent School District and The Academy at Carrie F. Thomas of the Birdville Independent School District.

In 2000, Lowery Road was built to hold 500 students and relieve growing populations at Eastern Hills Elementary and Bill J. Elliot Elementary. Lowery Road now has nearly 900 students. Of those, about 80 percent are low-income, and many live in dwellings with little or no green space. The school also has a growing Hispanic population, and education for this project is provided in English and Spanish.

The goal of this first meeting, which about 50 people attended, was for students, family, educators and community members to draw ideas for what they would like to see included in their school garden. The garden will begin installation in the spring semester of 2010 with a large, community garden day on Saturday, April 17.

Fourth grader Lynzie Brigham, who helped her mother and a friend create a garden design with a central tree, stone walkways, two water features, several flower beds and shrubbery, said that she is excited about contributing to this project. "I want to help design this garden," she said, "it will be a nice place to play and study."

Lynzie's mother, Lawanda Brigham, added that she is thrilled her daughter could participate. "Just the fact that she had a hand in making something that others could enjoy makes me happy," she said.

Nancy Payne, REAL School Gardens' garden designer, remarked, "It's thrilling to see how excited all the children are; especially to see that the youngest children have the largest dreams for their school garden. I'm also

amazed at how their drawings include most of what we call essential features of a learning garden, but in such grandiose ways. Children dream big – a pond becomes an ocean with a bridge, animal habitats become places for monkeys and dogs, and fruits bring forth cultural memories from their native countries. It's inspiring!"

Payne does her best to satisfy these visions with the realities of the budget, space and city ordinances. She takes the garden design drawings, comments from the school community and input from Lowery Road's educators and synthesizes all of their thoughts and desires into a unique plan. The garden is designed so that educators can teach lessons related to the Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills (TEKS), while children explore, experiment and grow alongside the plants.

The school community reviews and approves the design proposed by REAL School Gardens in February 2010. This spring, REAL School Gardens will begin obtaining the materials, many of which will come from in-kind donations or discounts, and will assist the school in recruiting the labor needed from the community. On April 17, children, parents, educators and community members join forces to put the plan into action with wheel barrels full of dirt and Texas natives ready to plant.

The organization provides financial support, materials, garden expertise and strategies for community engagement for the next five years to help Lowery Road maintain, and eventually sustain, its garden. The project will increase family members' involvement in the students' schoolwork, provide children with hands-on learning in integrated ways and create opportunities for the community to become involved in public education.

Scott Feille, REAL School Gardens' program director, commented, "From the moment we first met with the garden committee at Lowery Road, I've been most impressed by the wealth of ideas they have for using the garden to integrate subjects that are traditionally treated separately. Skillful teachers use the gardens to integrate math, science and language arts. The teachers at Lowery Road get that and I anticipate that their students will be fully engaged as a result." As a former educator, Feille knows the value of a school garden and the impact it can have upon children, particularly as gardens help to develop the whole child – both with student's academic and personal development.

"This is a great opportunity for us," said Pat Griffith, Lowery Road's garden coordinator, a science and reading teacher who was its Teacher of the Year for the 2008-'09 school year. Griffith previously ran an eco-friendly landscaping business and is well-versed in teaching nature's lessons. "These kids love to make something that they can be proud of. The garden will teach lessons well beyond those possible in the classroom."

About REAL School Gardens

REAL School Gardens cultivates relationships with elementary school communities to create learning gardens that raise hope, spark imaginations and connect children to nature. Currently, REAL School Gardens works with 66 schools in five urban school districts, ensuring that more than 40,000 children and more than 2,300 educators have daily access to nature through school gardens in North Texas. With plans to reach more students and school communities across the country, the organization is itself growing.

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