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BIRDVILLE AND DAVID E. SMITH ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS BRINGING GARDENS TO HALTOM CITY

Community invited to help install school garden Saturday, April 18 at David E. Smith

Haltom City, Texas – [April 10, 2009] – Birdville and David E. Smith Elementary Schools are giving a “green” thumbs-up to outdoor education with the installation of new gardens at their schools; they are among four new area schools to establish outdoor learning environments this spring with the support of REAL School Gardens.

Birdville Elementary officially installed its garden March 28 with 65 students, teachers, administrators and community members on hand to celebrate the fruits of their labor. Next comes the brand new school garden at David E. Smith Elementary, to be installed April 18. The fourth new school garden comes to Veda Knox Elementary on May 9. Hubbard Heights Elementary got its new garden April 4, thanks to a turnout of about 100 parents, children and teachers.

The new school gardens are the culmination of a community design process begun last September during a weekend retreat facilitated by REAL School Gardens. The non-profit organization has worked with each school community to design the best possible outdoor classroom that is unique to each school campus, working with parents, teachers, students and community members at each school.

The schools engaged in months of discussion, planning, site evaluation, and preparation for their garden installation. “Watching how these school communities came together to support the development of these gardens validates the passion we have at REAL School Gardens for this work,” said Jeanne McCarty, executive director.

Michelle Hughes, a fifth-grade science teacher at David E. Smith, said the design process began by encouraging each student to envision his or her own dream garden. After reviewing the various dream garden plans, Kerry Renta, a REAL School Gardens design consultant, blended elements from each “dream garden” to come up with a final design. “David E. Smith Elementary has never had anything like this. I know that it is going to be the start of something amazing for our students,” Hughes said.

Teaching in a school garden can create more interesting and meaningful learning opportunities for children, which can enhance learning across the disciplines. Each school garden will have a variety of elements that provide opportunities to make curriculum connections from science and math to social studies and beyond. Renta explained, “Native plant materials, also known as wildscape areas, can help educators teach habitats and ecosystems, food webs, food chains, life cycles and plant and animal adaptations.” “The possibilities are endless when you go outside to teach,” Renta added.

Another such teaching element is a rain barrel collection system, which will offer students a chance to recycle, experiment with water and learn how to conserve the natural resource. In preparation for the April 18 garden installation, volunteers in the David E. Smith community have begun building a system for collecting rainwater to maintain the garden and prevent flooding.

“Students will gain not only love and appreciation for their own garden, but learn how everything we study in the classroom works in nature,” Hughes said. “Students learn best by doing, and there is no better way than to create a safe space where this can happen, not only with their peers, but with their families and community.”

Fran Burns, coordinator of Keep Haltom City Beautiful, commented that she has seen firsthand how outdoor activities like those associated with school gardens can improve student academics and attitudes about the environment. “School gardens give students and educators the opportunity to touch the earth, learn how things grow and understand how to provide habitat for creatures that exist in nature and why this is important,” Burns said.

Birdville Elementary teachers and administrators also hope their garden will change children’s attitudes toward nature, as well as their personal habits that undermine that interaction. “In today’s society, many children leave school only to go home and sit in front of a television or video game,” said first-grade teacher Laura Shipley. “They’re not encouraged to be outside, playing and exploring nature. By utilizing our garden in the classroom, we expect to see a rise in our students’ self-esteem and pride as they see the fruits of their labor.”

Hughes remarked that the David E. Smith school staff hopes for a large turnout from the community for the garden installation on Saturday, April 18. All are welcome to participate from 8:00 am until 4:00 pm. Hughes said community involvement is one of the primary goals in the garden’s development. “We believe parents and community members will feel a sense of ownership when they see the final product, and as time passes their involvement will grow,” Hughes added. “The community is the link that will help our students and the garden flourish.”

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, REAL School Gardens works with 57 schools, ensuring that more than 30,000 children and more than 1,300 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. On the Internet, visit www.realschoolgardens.org.

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