



National Wildlife Federation

South Central Regional Center

505 East Huntland Drive, Suite 485 • Austin, TX 78752 • 512-476-9805

November 11, 2019

Dr. Paul Cruz, Superintendent
Austin Independent School District
1111 W. Sixth St.
Austin, Texas 78703

Dear Superintendent Cruz:

I am writing to express National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) sincere concern in hearing that Brooke Elementary is one of the Austin ISD Schools slated for closure and I am hoping that you will reconsider. In May 2019, Brooke Elementary earned NWF's highest sustainability award, the Eco-Schools USA Green Flag. Brooke Elementary is one of only 6 schools in the state of Texas that have received this prestigious award. The award is given to a school that demonstrates an exceptional commitment to sustainable living and practices, connection to community, innovative learning, the social and emotional development of children and the fostering of leadership skills.

Just this past April, NWF published a blog using Brooke Elementary's success in becoming a hub for community and wildlife as a model for all aspiring Eco-Schools. <https://blog.nwf.org/2019/04/earth-day-lessons-six-ways-your-school-can-become-a-community-hub-for-people-and-wildlife/>.

Evidence is mounting that children are losing touch with the natural world. Today's children are the first generation to grow up almost completely isolated from nature, spending half as much time outdoors as children did 20 years ago, and increasingly plugged into electronic media— up to eight hours per day on average. Aside from contributing to health and fitness problems, this indoor, sedentary lifestyle is depriving children of the physical, emotional and cognitive benefits that a healthy relationship with the natural world can provide.

Public schools in large urban areas like Austin with high minority and economically disadvantaged students are continually challenged to close achievement gaps between economic and ethnic groups. This problem is further compounded by the fact that green space in urban centers is limited and children from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods often do not have the same access to nature as their more fortunate peers. AISD sets the bar for school districts across the country who are making a commitment for students in urban

centers to have equitable access to nature. Brooke Elementary serves as an outstanding example of this commitment.

A growing body of research is demonstrating that students' ability to achieve in science and math is greatly enhanced when educators use the natural environment as a context for learning, particularly in an outdoor setting. Hundreds of studies now substantiate claims that incorporating nature in instruction improves academic achievement, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, leadership, and environmental stewardship. Students who participate in hands-on, school garden-based instruction outperform their peers in academic outcomes – and the more garden-based instruction, the larger the gains (Wells et al., 2015; Ernst and Stanek, 2006). Across diverse student populations and economic ranges, the greener a school's surroundings, the better its standardized test performance (Sivarajah et al., 2018). Brooke Academy embraces all of these tenets and using their environment as a lens, students engage in education rooted in Green ESTEAM (Entrepreneurship through Science, Technology, Engineering and Math).

Brooke Elementary is doing it right and setting their students up for a bright future. With great admiration for the overall direction Austin ISD is taking to provide equitable access to nature for their students, we urge you to keep Brooke Elementary open and to leverage their success as an example for all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marya Fowler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Marya" and last name "Fowler" clearly distinguishable.

Marya Fowler
NWF, Regional Director of Education