

December 8, 2021

Dr. Stephanie Elizalde, Superintendent  
Board of Trustees  
Austin Independent School District  
4000 S. I-H 35 Frontage Rd.  
Austin, TX 78704

Dear Superintendent Elizalde, Board President Rodriguez, and Trustees:

We, members of the Austin Independent School District (Austin ISD) Environmental Stewardship Advisory Committee (ESAC) and the School Health Advisory Council (SHAC), come together to share **our strong support for outdoor learning and dining at all Austin ISD schools.**

In 2017, Austin ISD endorsed the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights showing the District's support of the benefits of nature:

- 1) children who learn and play in nature are healthier, happier and perform better in school;
- 2) communities that have historically been impacted by systemic racism that have access to nature may benefit from greater health equity; and
- 3) children who develop a positive relationship with nature are more likely to become lifelong environmental stewards.

Although not anticipated in 2017, we now also know that the risk of COVID-19 transmission is lower outside due to increased layers of protection. Being outside increases opportunity for physical distancing, virus survivability is lower outside, and there is increased air flow. Allowing some students to eat outside while others remain indoors can also ease scheduling burdens by increasing the number of students that can enjoy their meals at the same time. If coordinated with Energy Management staff, increased time outdoors can also lead to reduced energy use and cost by not cooling, heating, or lighting indoor classrooms and other facilities while not in use.

The SHAC's SY2020-21 Annual Report documents the SHAC's interest in "[s]upporting outdoor classrooms and outdoor cafeterias; creating more consistent application of the guidelines with an eye towards equity for consistent implementation and equitable distribution among all campuses." The ESAC also has consistently championed outdoor learning, dining, and play for the many health, wellbeing, and academic benefits that time outdoors provides. ESAC members made this commitment clear with a January 2019 letter supporting continued investment in the Outdoor Learning Specialist and Science Administrative positions and a March 2020 letter supporting sustainability principles and practices--including outdoor learning--in the School Changes process.

We are proud of the District's moves towards ensuring more equitable access to outdoor dining and learning options, including the use of ESSER and Austin ISD Crisis Fund donations to purchase tables, shade umbrellas, water bottle refill stations, and other supportive infrastructure. To support this physical infrastructure, members of our committees are collaborating communitywide to provide additional support, including cataloguing outdoor lunch best practices from across Austin ISD schools, hosting an outdoor lunch best practices workshop (in addition to ongoing outdoor learning training), and

coordinating volunteers to help with outdoor lunch. ESAC members also worked with the Cities Connecting Children to Nature Initiative in 2020 to create a map of green spaces for outdoor learning within a five- to ten-minute walk of AISD campuses and helped create outdoor classrooms for six Austin ISD campuses that had an identified need.

We ask that the District continue to realize the many benefits of outdoor time during the school day by:

1. Instructing principals to create ways for their staff, students, families, and community volunteers to participate in outdoor activities, especially during this time of heightened health risks due to COVID-19; and
2. Convening a districtwide working group to develop a comprehensive and equity-centered outdoor learning plan with a proposed implementation timeline and funding request. The plan should include, but not be limited to:
  - a. Every Austin ISD school provides outdoor dining for some portion of its students on a regular basis.
  - b. Every Austin ISD student has access to daily outdoor learning opportunities as part of instructional time.
  - c. Every Austin ISD student is afforded the rights included in the Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our requests. We look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

AISD Environmental Stewardship Advisory Committee and School Health Advisory Council, as represented by:

ESAC Tri-chairs



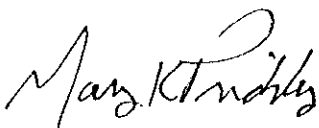
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Aimee Aubin



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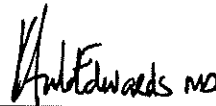
Jen L. Cregar



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Mary K. Priddy

SHAC Co-chairs



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Kimberly C. Avila Edwards MD, FAAP



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Mary Renfro

Encl.: Inventory of Outdoor Learning Features by Campus  
Summary of Outdoor Dining Survey Results

Cc: Alana Bejarano, Director of Health Services  
Hannah Gehl, Health Services Specialist  
Darien Clary, Sustainability Manager  
Anne Muller, Outdoor Learning Specialist  
Matias Seguras, Chief of Operations  
Anthony Mays, Chief of School Leadership  
Elizabeth Casas, Chief Academic Officer  
Dr. Stephanie Hawley, Equity Officer  
Eduardo Ramos, Chief Financial Officer  
Dr. Jacob Reach, Chief of Governmental Relations and Board Services  
Jason Stanford, Chief of Communications & Community Engagement  
Alejandro Delgado, Executive Director of Enrollment & Advocacy  
Leonor Vargas, Administrative Supervisor of Parent Programs  
Michelle Wallis, Executive Director, Office of Innovation & Development