**Nature Classroom Update**

The plans for the nature classroom to be built at the west end of the playground are paused while we seek additional funds. I will submit a proposal this month for the Outdoor Classroom Pilot Site Project. This project is sponsored by the Nebraska Department of Education, the Early Childhood Training Center, Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, The Arbor Day Foundation, and the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children. The goal is to develop sites in early childhood programs of elementary schools that will become part of the national network of Nature Explore Classrooms so that they may serve as demonstration sites for other programs wishing to use nature as an integral part of children’s daily learning.

Dimensions Educational Research Foundation research shows that children need connections with the natural world as a part of their healthy growth and development. Research also shows a large decline in the amount of time that children today spend outdoors. This decrease is linked to an increase in childhood obesity and fear or dislike of the natural environment (rain, wildflowers, birds, trees). Children have been found to be fearful of and have misconceptions about the natural world when they have little contact with living things. Some of their attitudes are formed through electronic media. Children do benefit highly when they are able to explore, discover, and play in a nature classroom.

Dimensions researchers documented evidence of valuable skill development occurring across all learning domains when a child spends daily time in a well-designed outdoor space with a nurturing adult. They found that this is particularly true for children with sensory integration challenges.

An important part of the Center’s project will be the training of the teachers. The teachers will learn how to use the nature classroom to enhance the child’s learning. Every teacher will attend training given by the Dimension Foundation during the next year. The training will begin in August with a second group attending in October. If the Center is a recipient of the grant, it will provide the following for the nature classroom project:

- Training and support of teachers - free training for all the staff, including a day-long Nature Explore session at Arbor Day Farm.
- Technical assistance - free consultation from a landscape architect/education specialist team to help develop the initial plan for the outdoor space design.
- Stipend for outdoor materials - $3,000 to purchase natural outdoor equipment.

The above is valued at $10,000.

I invite parents to be involved in this important project. A small group of parents willing to help with the planning and implementation of the nature classroom would be ideal. Please consider giving your time to a few meetings as we go forward with the project.

Last year’s November fundraiser provided seed money to begin work on the nature classroom. Whether or not we receive the grant, we will need funds for this year’s fundraiser to complete it.

Check the Arbor Day Farm’s website arbordayfarm.org to see photos of their nature classroom. To read the research of the Dimensions Foundation go their website at dimensionsfoundation.org.

Connie