

July 5, 2022

Waters Local School Counsel

Principal Rutkowski

Waters School Community

Re: Letter of Support for Full Funding of Waters Ecology Program and Garden

Dear Members of the Waters Local School Counsel and Principal Rutkowski:

We are incredibly fortunate that the Waters Ecology Program is at our school. It is not just a class. The Waters Ecology Program and Garden makes our school unique across all the schools in Chicago—it makes it a special place to be, where children are uniquely supported and nourished.

My family and I moved to this neighborhood so our children could attend Waters Elementary School. We chose Waters and this community specifically because of the Ecology Program and the Waters' Garden. We have learned that we are just one of many families who, over the years, have put down roots here to in order to be a part of the Ecology Program, Garden, and the school community that thrives as a result of these critical resources.

We are in a time of crisis for our common home. The climate crisis has been called the “defining crisis of our time,” but it is one of many crises we are experiencing all at once.¹ There is also the sixth mass extinction happening currently (the biodiversity crisis), a pollution crisis (of air, land, and water—by chemicals, plastic, heavy metals, radioactivity, noise, and light), and deforestation and natural resource depletion (we are using our natural resources faster than they can replenish themselves).² There is also a gun violence crisis in the United States, including, as we know, here in Chicago.³ This is the context in which we must raise and educate our children.

¹ United Nations, *The Climate Crisis—A Race We Can Win* (2022), <https://www.un.org/en/un75/climate-crisis-race-we-can-win#:~:text=Climate%20change%20is%20the%20defining,a%20race%20we%20can%20win%E2%80%9D>.

² Robert H. Cowie, et al. *The Sixth Mass Extinction: fact, fiction or speculation?*, *BIOLOGICAL REVIEWS*, Vol. 97 pp. 640-663 (2022), available at, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/brv.12816>; United Nations, *As Humanity's Environment Footprint Becomes Increasingly Unsustainable, Global Leaders Recommit to Joint Climate Action, at Opening of Stockholm Summit*, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/envdev2046.doc.htm> (“[H]uman demand on natural resources has become unbearably heavy, with ecosystem degradation compromising the well-being of over 3 billion people and a growing tide of pollution and waste costing some 9 million lives annually.”); Laura Parker, *The world's plastic pollution crisis explained*, *NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC*, (2019), available at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/plastic-pollution> (“Plastic pollution has become one of the most pressing environmental issues, as rapidly increasing production of disposable plastic products overwhelms the world's ability to deal with them.”).

³ Statement on Gun Violence Crisis from 60 National Organizations, June 6, 2022, available at, https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/zLatest_News/Statement_Gun_Violence_Crisis_from_60_National_Organiz

There is no escaping that this is the world they have inherited, from those who came before and those who are still here now.

The Ecology Program and the Waters Garden are a refuge in this storm—for Waters students, Waters parents, and the community members who surround our school. Having such a refuge is important in and of itself.

A rich body of research now formally demonstrates what many of us have long known—spending time in nature has both physical and psychological benefits for human wellbeing.⁴ Green spaces near schools promote cognitive development and self-control behaviors in children. Exposure to natural environments improves working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attention control.⁵ The impacts of green space on the brain is profound, students briefly gazing out at a garden during an academic task results in them making fewer mistakes!⁶ Exposure to green space also reduces the risk of psychiatric disorders including depression, anxiety, mood disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and substance use disorder.⁷ Time in nature also increases children’s ability and likelihood to engage cooperatively with others.⁸ Research has also found that it is the more wild spaces that have the greatest ability to strongly reduce stress hormones like cortisol and α -amylase.⁹

We give our children an enormous gift each day by sending them to school in a building surrounded by a garden—not just any garden, but a garden they tend themselves, that the community members around them tend, and that their grown-ups and their friends’ and classmates’ grown-ups tend. A garden where soil is cultivated for food. A garden where Mr. Leki and community members carefully tend wild spaces to allow them their wildness (with all its amazing benefits!) and to support our precious native plants, which bring beauty and inspiration, home for incredible insects like butterflies, and build our soil for continued sustenance. The children have a place to explore, where there is wonder and awe, and also care and security.

[ations.aspx](#); Sarah Owerhohle and Krista Mahr, *America’s Gun Violence Crisis*, POLITICO PULSE (2022), available at, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-pulse/2022/05/25/americas-gun-violence-crisis-00034936>.

⁴ Kirsten Weir, *Nurtured by Nature*, AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION MONITOR ON PSYCHOLOGY, Vol.51, No. 3 (2020), available at <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>.

⁵ Kathryn E. Schertz and Marc G. Berman, *Understanding Nature and Its Cognitive Benefits*, CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE, Vol. 28, No. 5 (2019), available at, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0963721419854100>.

⁶ Kate E. Lee et al., *40-second green roof views sustain attention: The role of micro-breaks in attention restoration*, JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 42 (2015), pp. 182-189, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494415000328?via%3Dihub>

⁷ Kristine Engemann et al., *Residential green space in childhood is associated with lower risk of psychiatric disorders from adolescence into adulthood*, PNAS, Vol. 116, No. 11 (2019), available at <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1807504116>.

⁸ Raelyne L. Dopko et al., *The psychological and social benefits of a nature experience for children: A preliminary investigation*, JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 63, No. 1 (2019), available at, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>.

⁹ Alan Ewert and Yun Chang, *Levels of Nature and Stress Response*, BEHAVIOR SCIENCES, 2018 May; Vol. 8 No. 5 (2018), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5981243/>.

The Garden is an irreplaceable asset. But this letter is not about the garden alone. It is not only the exposure to natural spaces that is good for children’s wellbeing—it is the connection they feel to nature itself.¹⁰ Waters’ Ecology Program gives our children that connection.

For over a decade, Mr. Leki has designed and executed a holistic program that teaches children to (1) observe and work to understand the living systems of which they are a part, and on which they depend; (2) contribute meaningfully and with care to those systems; and (3) build sustaining community across differences. These are precisely the skills that our children most need to successfully navigate these challenging times and the ones to come—and to build a healthier, safer, and more vibrant future for themselves and one another.

I have witnessed first-hand Mr. Leki’s powerful work with the Ecology Program. This year I volunteered to help with the annual first grade play, which tells the legend of turtle and snake. Through song and drama, first graders get the opportunity to teach the history of their school—how the Chicago River once flowed through the school grounds, the way people moved the river a few blocks away to be deeper and straighter, and the way a group of students stepped up and took action to build the garden they wanted to see and play in and explore at their very own school. It is a beautiful story, and the children are in awe to learn of their special place in their school’s rich history. First-graders then get to teach this history to the kindergarteners and pre-K students, who then too are able to feel connected to this history, their fellow students, and the garden that surrounds their very special school—including the amazing animals that live there. This experience gives the students a deep sense of belonging and connection—something Mr. Leki fosters throughout all his work with the Ecology Program.

Mr. Leki regularly invites parents to be a part of Ecology Program experiences. This means students get to see their grown-ups and their friends’ grown-ups in the school and in their classrooms. This helps foster community and a sense of care among the students that I value immensely as a Waters parent. It is this sense of community and care, of knowing one another, and feeling connected to one another that helps us keep our students safe. As a result of these volunteer opportunities, I have connected with other parents, and my son has connected with a wider array of students across multiple grades, building new friendships and acquaintances that make our community stronger. The Garden Stewardship Days provide ways for the larger community to be involved with the garden and further build connections between the school and the community that help build a safe and thriving community for our students.

¹⁰ John M. Zelenski and Elizabeth K. Nisbet, *Happiness and Feeling Connected: The Distinct Role of Nature Relatedness*, ENVIRONMENT AND BEHAVIOR, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2014 (2012), available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0013916512451901> (finding that a feeling of connection to nature is a significant predictor of happiness even after controlling for general connectedness). Cartwright, B.D.S., et al., *Nearby Nature ‘Buffers’ the Effect of Low Social Connectedness on Adult Subjective Wellbeing over the Last 7 Days*, INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH AND PUBLIC HEALTH, Vol. 15, No. 6 (2018) (“Results confirmed the importance of nature exposure for wellbeing in itself, and highlighted its potential role in offering socially isolated individuals a way of satisfying the need to feel connected.”), available at <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/15/6/1238>.

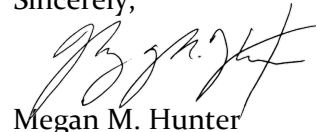
The value of Mr. Leki's holistic approach in creating and implementing the Ecology Program cannot be overstated. The way the Program works up through the grades—starting the younger children at home in the garden at a place of learning and awe and completing manageable tasks, continuing out to explore the wider world, first the river and then the larger Forest Preserves, and then returning back home to contribute more richly to the garden—gives the children something to look forward to, something to aspire to, and a great sense of pride. It teaches them a remarkable sense of scale, allowing them to work and contribute over time and at varying levels and degrees as their own abilities and knowledge grows. This ability to see over the long-term, to have the firm understanding that small tasks repeated over time lead to enormous changes and incredible fruits, and to know in their bones that our world is alive and there for them, just as it is dependent on them, is what will make our children successful and great in this particular time.

Mr. Leki's skill, dedication, and hard work is what brought the Waters Ecology Program about and made it consistently outstanding for over a decade. He designed something truly phenomenal and new and made it work. For this, he is also an outstanding role model for our children who will hopefully also learn to design and implement amazing new ways of doing things.

As a Waters parent, of a rising second grader and rising kindergartener, I fully support the Ecology Program. I ask that Mr. Leki's work be sustained at the full level it deserves, with funding that recognizes (1) the executive role he has played, and continues to play, in designing and sustaining the Ecology Program, (2) the profound skill and knowledge he brings to the cultivation of native and agriculture plants in the Waters Garden, (3) his skills as an educator, and (4) the skill, coordination, time, and care he uses to build a strong and thriving school community.

Mr. Leki's work with the Ecology Program has made Waters Elementary School a destination for many and has attracted valued parents and students to our school. He should be fully supported to ensure the Program continues to thrive.

Sincerely,



Megan M. Hunter

Waters Parent