

Principal Mr. Rutkowski

Although I have contacted the Ward office and the local Green Council, I have delayed in writing to you concerning the matter of the community garden which sits on the Chicago Public School system's property at Waters Elementary School, and its related staffing and programming. I had hoped you would respond positively to input from the school and surrounding community. However, your recent community communication of July 20, 2022, has influenced me to weigh in. As a National Board Certified teacher with an MA in Curriculum and Instruction, University of Illinois certified Master Naturalist, and longtime community member, I write to you today to express my utter dismay at the news of the firing of Pete Leki. I realize that you may choose not to read further, but I urge you to at least consider the opinions of a community member, parent, volunteer, and property owner who has lived in this neighborhood for 30+ years. In addition, as a master naturalist and formal educator of 30+ years, I would like to offer for your consideration information which you may not have yet taken.

Community Development

Waters Elementary has not always been a destination school for upper middle class parents. The neighborhood in which Waters sits was once home to drug dealers and active violence. As a woman, I avoided walking through the area after dark going to and from locations on Lawrence Avenue. It was not a safe area. At one point, after several CAPS meetings, neighbors held a peace march starting at Waters in the early aughts. Thus, when I was looking for a neighborhood school in which to enroll my children a few decades ago, while the small garden on the property amidst the sea of asphalt was a positive, the neighborhood, poor condition of the school as well as the lack of vision by the administration outweighed the green space. Instead, I enrolled both my children, when of age, at Ravenswood Elementary School where I was a founding member of Friends of Ravenswood. Although I chose to enroll my children in a neighborhood school, I want you to understand that at that time, parents of means in the community chose private or magnet schools for their children, not neighborhood schools like Waters or Ravenswood.

Simultaneously, Pete Leki was engaged in working with community members and parents to remove the vast sea of asphalt and to convert part of the area surrounding the school into a teaching garden. The task was a labor of love and perseverance that changed the perception and destiny of Waters. It was Mr. Leki's extended efforts that drew the attention of forward-thinking parents in the neighborhood and who began enrolling their children in order to take advantage of the ecology program then in its infancy.

Parents of Waters founded a parent's group to raise money for the school and to lobby for infrastructure improvements from the Chicago Board of Education. Parents were wildly successful obtaining not only additions to the school, but installation of a swale to help control flood waters. These improvements also benefitted the surrounding neighborhood. I am sure I don't need to explain to you the mechanics of gentrification. But I will emphasize that improvements in the Waters Elementary campus, largely spurred and maintained by Mr. Leki's tireless efforts, led to an increase in parent interest, improved quality of life for residents within the school's boundaries, and a consequent rise in property values around the school.

I do not place much stock, as it were, in property values, but I will say that the involvement of the community grew along with the garden. Regular garden workdays and nights brought people out which in turn led to less crime and violence in the neighborhood. Community cohesion is one of the legacies of

Mr. Leki's work in the garden. I argue that the transformation would not have occurred without Pete Leki at the center.

Education

Mr. Leki's program is an exemplary environmental education program. Environmental education is extremely beneficial to students' academic, mental and physical development. In case you are not aware of the vast amount of research that has been conducted in the last two decades, here is a short summary of research I have compiled:

Environmental Education Benefits Students by...

- **Improving Academic Achievement.** EE improves test scores by providing students with engaging lessons about the natural world that can be applied to all subject areas and grades.
- **Breaking the Indoor Habit.** EE offers an antidote to the plugged-in lives of today's generation, which is the first to grow up indoors. Children who experience school grounds or play areas with diverse natural settings are more physically active, more aware of good nutrition, more creative, and more civil to one another.
- **Improving Student Health.** EE gets students outdoors and active, and helps to address common health issues in children today, such as obesity, attention deficit disorder, and depression.
- **Improving Focus and Cognition.** EE increases the ability of students to focus and improves their cognitive abilities. Children with attention-deficit disorder also benefit from more exposure to nature—the greener a child's everyday environment, the more manageable are their symptoms.
- **Supporting STEM.** EE offers an engaging platform for gaining and applying knowledge and skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).
- **Meeting 21st Century Needs.** EE emphasizes skills essential for succeeding in tomorrow's world, such as questioning, investigating, defining problems, analyzing, interpreting, reasoning, developing conclusions, and solving problems.
- **Cultivating Leadership Qualities.** EE emphasizes cooperative learning with others, critical thinking and discussion, and a focus on action strategies with real-world applications.

For additional information and research links, please see:

<https://www.neefusa.org/resource/environmental-literacy-report-2015>

But the education and involvement of students, parents and community members was not the only result of Pete Leki's work. He hosted Chicago Public Schools compost cohorts, helping dozens of schools and hundreds of educators implement robust composting programs at their schools. Not only is implementation of a compost program an authentic STEM activity allowing students to make positive change in their community, but composting also keeps food waste out of landfills and thus assists in reducing greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change. In addition to the compost cohorts, Pete Leki served as a mentor to teachers across the city hoping to start their own native and edible gardens.

Education about the natural world and stewardship that impacted students, parents, community members and fellow educators is another legacy of Mr. Leki's work at Waters.

Environment

A final legacy of Mr. Leki's achievement that I want to emphasize is the installation of the garden has reduced the effect of an urban heat island around the school and neighboring community. In addition, the deep-rooted plants that grow in the native areas contribute to carbon sequestration which helps to ameliorate the effects of climate change. Those same deep roots coupled with the deep roots of the stately oaks on the property mitigate flooding in the community. One can physically feel the difference in temperature and air quality as one walks west on Sunnyside Avenue past the campus. That transformation, too, is a legacy of Pete Leki's work at Waters.

I read your recent note with dismay. I do not agree with the harmful decision-making process in which you have engaged regarding Mr. Leki, the school ecology program and community. Waters Elementary, the building and campus, do not belong to you nor to the current parents, some of whom obviously lack understanding of the benefits the garden bestows and has bestowed on the community. The building and the campus belong to the larger community, and, yes, to the taxpayers who fund the education system.

Additionally, the land in its current state must be stewarded to continue to provide the ecological benefits I outlined above. Your current plan will in no way maintain the established ecosystem that has been rebuilt there from scratch. That ecosystem also belongs to the surrounding community, many of whom help steward it. The garden, properly stewarded and maintained, will play a big role in making their urban neighborhood livable in the face of the oncoming impacts of climate change. As you are new to the community and to Chicago, I could attempt to interpret your decisions as those of one who does not understand the full picture. I hope that lack of understanding is the case rather than that your decision is based on a punitive mindset.