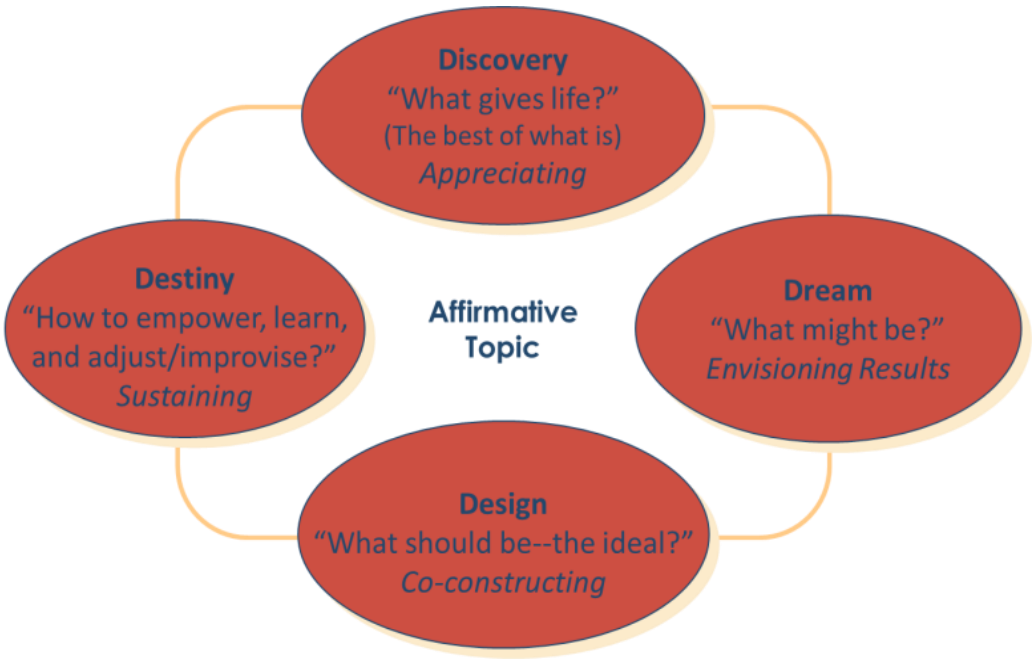
National Wildlife Federation Appreciative Inquiry Summit for Teachers Involved in the Schoolyard Habitat Project 2012

Department of Research and Evaluation
Austin Independent School District

What is Appreciative Inquiry? Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizational study and analysis that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate what are referred to as the "life-giving" forces of the organization's existence, its *positive core*, in order to create a better future (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005). AI is used in the organizational development field in large and small businesses and industries, nonprofits, and educational institutions. AI has been used in a wide variety of organizations for many different purposes. It has been applied to strategic planning, cultural transformation, customer satisfaction, organizational redesign, and leadership development (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). What makes AI unique as an organizational development and change process is its attention to (a) being purposefully positive, (b) building on past successes, (c) emphasizing an approach that is both grassroots and top down, (d) being highly participatory, (e) stimulating vision and creativity, and (f) accelerating change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Figure 1 illustrates the four-stage (4D) cycle that constitutes all AI activities.

Figure 1. Appreciative Inquiry 4-D cycle



What was the AI Summit for the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Schoolyard Habitat project? The AI Summit for the NWF Schoolyard Habitat (SYH) project in Austin Independent School District (AISD) occurred on March 4, 2012. Teachers from 9 participating schools came together at the Science Health Resource Center (SHRC) for a 4-hour summit to discuss the project on their campuses and to build a vision for the future of AISD's SYH project in the coming years. During the summit, teachers were led through each of the 4-D phases: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. The results of the conversations are described in this report and are organized by AI phase.

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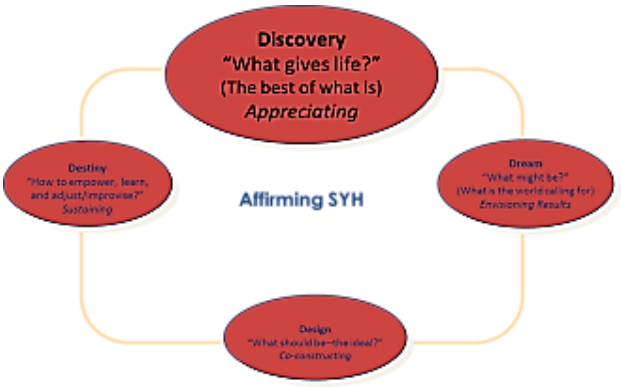

Phase 1 Discovery. Teachers began the summit by interviewing each other to begin the process of discovering the "positive core" of the SYH project as it exists in AISD. In extended interviews, teachers were probed about their experiences from a positive perspective (i.e., what is really working well). Teachers were allowed time to reflect on the positive achievements and experiences thus far. Interviewers noted the most memorable quote or story they heard during the interview. Then participants came together to share what they had learned. Interviewers identified the points made during their interviews that "really resonated" and that they "really connected with." As they shared these portions of their interviews with the whole group, they identified common themes across the lived experiences of SYH participants.

Theme 1: Ownership of the SYH experience. The experience of planning, building, maintaining, and learning in the SYHs was perceived by interviewees and interviewers alike as being owned by teachers and owed by students. Ownership of the project as a whole resonated across participants as a key part of this project. Participants concluded that enthusiasm for the project was higher as a result of feeling ownership for the project. For example, one interviewee stated, "This movement is intrinsically motivated. It's not something we are made to do." This same feeling was expressed by other interviewees. Further demonstrating the feeling of ownership, a participant said, "We teachers have a lot on our plates, but we see the value in this!" Another interviewee expressed the idea of student ownership by saying, "This project is student driven and they have a specific interest in creating something they can come back and visit."

Theme 2: Universality of Learning Opportunities. The interviewees described learning opportunities as an important component that defines the SYH experience. Learning opportunities were abundant for teachers and for all students. Teachers indicated that the SYH building and maintaining phases were an optimal learning tool to meet the needs of their students' diverse learning abilities. They believed that working on the SYHs allowed students with disabilities, gifted students, and students from lower socioeconomic levels to work together on a project in which they could be seen as equal contributors. One teacher observed, "Children of poverty don't have a safe place to go out, so we take them out for a new experience." Another said that "A key benefit is for my students to have a level playing field—gifted, autistic, struggling learners. They clamored to go out there."

In terms of identifying what was most important to the participants about SYH, teachers centered on variations in the positive impact on students. Interview responses included "being able to use it [SYH] to help students become engaged outside" and "students will be involved in ongoing awareness of the part nature plays in their lives." Finally, one interviewee stated, "Students increase their knowledge of science through the habitat."

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About the SYH project. The SYH project in AISD has been a two-year dedicated effort to establish outdoor learning environments on several campuses within the district. Principals volunteered their campuses to participate in the project of building the SYH on their campus in either the 2010–2011 or 2011–2012 school year. This report focuses on teachers' perceptions from schools that participated during Year 2 (2011–2012).

Additional information about this project is available on the AISD Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) website.

Teachers were asked to consider 4 subthemes: organizational effectiveness, revolutionary partnerships, innovative and adaptive environment, and academic quality/student engagement. Within each of the subthemes, teachers generated examples from their interviews that illustrated each subtheme. Evidence was presented to support the strengths as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with each subtheme.

With respect to SYH's *organizational effectiveness* teachers reported that the present structure worked effectively: a project leader at NWF, an outdoor curriculum specialist familiar with the AISD curriculum who can assist in writing lessons, and a team on each campus to build and use the habitat. One teacher's comment that expressed a group consensus was "The committee believes in and works together well to accomplish the habitat." The most important strength contributing to the project's organizational effectiveness was identified as strategic partnerships and multiple levels of support. Teachers valued the many sources of support for the habitat, which included physical assistance in the planning and building phases, community support, support for academic lessons, and administrative support, as well as specialist support for locating and submitting grant applications for supplemental funding, for selecting native plants, and for gathering needed materials or equipment. The greatest opportunity for growth was identified as the need for making the materials, equipment, and thoroughly integrated outdoor curriculum resources easily accessible to teachers who are extremely pressed for preparation time and materials. Teachers suggested that one strategy to meet this need would be assembly of classroom kits for outdoor education that could be made available to teachers using the SYHs.

When asked to explore the idea of how the SYH includes *revolutionary partnerships*, teachers identified collaborations they felt were of high value. These included Boy Scouts, high school students who need to do community service hours, Keep Austin Beautiful, PALS, PTA, high school football teams, community members, and parents. Speaking about parents, one teacher said, "Building the habitat allowed kids to connect to their parents on another level." These were partnerships that teachers felt would not have been forged if not for the habitat project. Key strengths in this area were additional funding support (e.g., from Lowe's and Environmental Resource Management); community news letters that provided requests for assistance with the SYHs from community members; and formal and informal partnerships with families and organizations to provide physical labor, supplies, gardening expertise, and curriculum resources. The greatest opportunity for further development within this subtheme was identified as creation of a wide array of entry points for community involvement so access can be open to all, and development of formal and informal networking within the district, schools, and neighborhoods in which the SYHs exist.

Theme 3: Innovative and Adaptive Environment. The third subtheme, *innovative and adaptive environment*, was more difficult for teachers to capture in examples. However, one of the most illustrative said that "we took a high-traffic space [on campus] and transformed it [into a habitat]." Another teacher observed that they had transformed a completely empty space on their campus into a habitat. The use of topographical features with native plants and adaptations were of importance to teachers when examining this subtheme. The greatest strength in this subtheme was the SYH campus teams' access to NWF materials, including the *How-To Guide* and *Access Nature Curriculum Guide.* These resources provided teachers with ideas to support planning and building their habitats. In terms of opportunities for further growth and development, teams identified Wix.com as a place where photos of SHY and other outdoor learning habitats can be obtained or shared with teachers on other campuses to stimulate ideas.

Theme 4: Academic quality and Student Engagement. Finally, with regard to *academic quality and student engagement*, teachers were most struck by the level of students' motivation and ownership observed in relation to the habitats. A teacher observed, "Students are very motivated to go out and be out. There is diminished behavior issues (sic) because students want to do a garden." The greatest strength was determined to be the access teams had to the NWF education coordinator and the AISD Outdoor Learning Specialist. The recommendations and learning resources provided and the hands-on support for lesson development were prized commodities among participants. The greatest opportunity for future development was identified as the further integration of the SYHs in subjects other than science (e.g., mathematics [math], geography, and writing). Additionally, new elective classes in science could be developed that focus on outdoor learning. One campus has already established a Native Plants and Species elective-credit course. Finally, assembling kits of needed equipment and teaching materials to accompany lesson plans reformatted to appear directly in the Curriculum Road Maps was strongly recommended. Teachers indicated that in the absence of this level of integration, it is more challenging to gather needed materials, to identify when and how to use the SYHs to teach academic content, and to feel confident that every opportunity to use the habitat has been maximized.

How do we carry forward what we value most? Teachers discussed in interviews and in group conversations how to carry forward what they valued most. By defining their common experiences with SYH, participants identified the main themes of what made this project special (i.e., what worked best, and what they valued about the experience). How do they begin to look toward the future with an eye on the most positive aspects that made this project special, and how do they build on the identified strengths and keep them at the center of the work? Teachers reflected upon their experiences to identify precisely what they value most about their involvement in SYH. Among the Big Ideas for this question were the commitment to a set of ideals that included (a) focusing on the benefits to students, academics, and social skills; (b) building team work and collaboration across all school and community stakeholders; (c) being intrinsically motivated to participate in the SYH project; (d) developing community partnerships; and (e) giving students an opportunity to experience outdoor environmental education and to see real-life examples and applications of what they learned in the classroom. The "how" to this question is addressed later in the report.

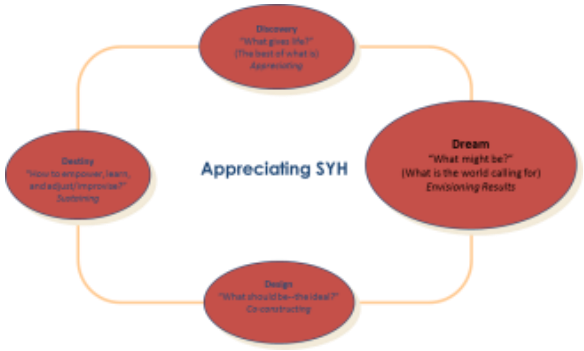
What is the vision for the future of the SYH? Formal grant funding provided by NWF through the Toyota Corp expired in Summer 2012. Attention to and resources for maintenance and use of the SYHs for teaching academics is now transitioning entirely to the school campuses. As is part of all grant endeavors to establish new programs and resources in our schools, the idea of institutionalization (i.e., ongoing use of the program or resource) must be considered carefully by the grant recipients. The NWF proposed to assist schools in planning, creating, and scaffolding initial use the habitat for academic instruction. All participating schools have now achieved those goals. Curriculum materials have been aligned briefly to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and AISD science curriculum. SYHs at all but one campus have successfully completed certification by the NWF, indicating that they contain all necessary components to be considered a true native outdoor learning habitat. As teachers reflected on their experiences with the SYHs, they recognized the need to continue to move forward of their own volition.

AISD's Science Department has agreed to contribute to funding to keep the Outdoor Learning Specialist position operational in the 2012–2013 academic year. The district will support 50% of the position, with the remaining resources provided by NWF and The Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CINCA). This is particularly important to teachers, given their discussion points detailed later in this report, as well as the feedback received

from the teacher survey conducted in Spring 2012 (report available online from AISD DRE). Each of these information sources indicates that teachers desire further support and scaffolding in order to use the SYHs for teaching academic content most efficiently and effectively. Many teachers indicated this was their first adventure into environmental education. They reported enjoying learning but needed support in both the design and development phases (e.g., what types of plants to select and where to purchase them), and in the curriculum development (e.g., how to efficiently gather materials and equipment and implement lessons that dovetail easily with the AISD curriculum and TEKS). Continued access to the outdoor learning specialist will be a valuable asset to teachers as they delve into the new opportunities presented by the SYH.

As teachers considered their Vision of the Future for the AISD SYH, common elements emerged as focal points:

- Expanded, academically integrated use of the habitats on each campus
- Extended engagement of students with nature through planning extensions of the habitats (e.g., more paths, plants, and trails)
- Continued assistance to redesign lessons and curriculum provided by the NWF's "Access Nature" to make materials and equipment readily available, as well as lesson plans that look like the AISD Road Maps
- Evolution of the SYH to become more interdisciplinary and increase innovative community partnerships



Phase 2 Dream. The second phase of the AI cycle is appropriately titled "Dream" because it asks participants to use the results of the Discover phase to begin examining their dream for the future of the project. After participants identified what they knew to be the strengths and values of the project, they reflected on how the project might look if its finest points became the performance norm. This phase asked participants to jump ahead to the point in time when the hard work had been accomplished and the organization or project was reaping the benefits and successes. The Dream phase of AI was introduced to participants in the following way:

> You wake up and it is 2017 (5 years in the future). You rush from your desk to the SchoolYard Habitat. It has flourished and is more successful than ever! Teachers, parents, students and community members have gathered to present your campus with the "Best Use of a SchoolYard Habitat EVER" award. What's going on that tells you it has flourished and is more successful than ever? What has the AISD SYH accomplished? Be specific. What resources, training, materials or labor do you believe went into the SYH to bring it to this new, high level?

Teachers' visions for the future were varied and positive. In response to "What's going on that tells you the SYH has flourished and is more successful than it ever has been? What do you see? What do you hear?" teachers responded that they saw students' pride and knowledge. They saw SYHs on all district campuses, including elementary and high schools. Some of the innovative practices in the future of SYH included gardening of herbs, wildflowers, and vegetables; cooking lessons; teaching students to call plants by their scientific names; student-

led tours of the habitats and gardens; and multiple habitats on each campus. Teachers saw the outdoor learning curriculum had been fully integrated with the science curriculum and across other areas of learning, as well. The biggest accomplishment of AISD at that point was that the traditional curriculum had been transformed into a cross-content platform with intensive student projects enabling students to process information at a higher level of synthesis. The results of the miraculous transformation of the curriculum already were evident in increased math and science scores. Additionally, twenty percent of all lessons incorporated SYHs across all grade levels and subjects. Field trips to visit the outdoor learning habitats at other campuses and at the SHRC were taking place. Classes were offered that were structured around the SYHs, including classes on native plants and species, as well as other topics in science. Anticipated further changes in the SYH program included integration of outdoor lessons with the Curriculum Roadmaps, all teachers in the district trained to teach outside, and putting administrative expectations in place for the success of SYH.

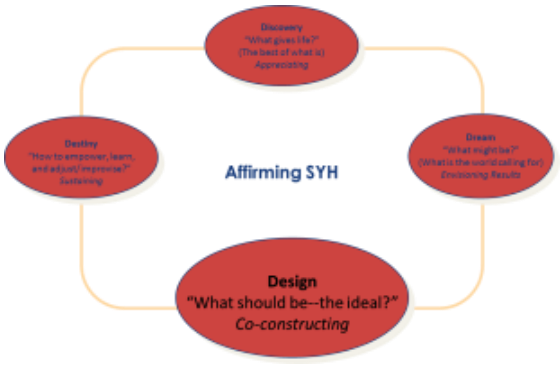
In the phase of Dreaming, teachers were asked to continue this vision of the future and explore changes in themselves. They were asked to envision in what ways they would be happier with themselves, their work, and their out-of-work life five years in the future. The intention of including this component is to enable teachers to see themselves in the future of this project. Change comes about as the result of personal investment in the future of a project. Without personal investment in a positive future, the desired outcomes are challenging at best. Teachers discussed their personal transformations in terms of their personal commitment to the SYH project. Some described their life in 5 years, including their children in college and more personal time to devote to taking additional classes or training in outdoor teaching and curriculum development. Others projected that technology would be integrated into the SYHs. They would be able to develop these applications to assist teachers and students in learning outdoors. One teacher said, *"I feel like I taught students real-life skills. More fulfillment."*

Teachers were asked to Dream about how AISD has magnified its distinctive capabilities and strengths in science and math education. In response, teachers described supporting outdoor learning and hands-on standards-based projects for students; a culture of sharing resources, ideas, and lessons to improve existing SYHs; and inclusion of campuses that do not yet have daily access to an SYH on their campus. Other pictures of the future for the district included vertical team consideration; district-wide curriculum for native plants and animals; access to lab materials; service learning projects by students; community relationships of higher quality and intensity; an expectation by students and parents that the AISD curriculum will include outdoor learning activities; a broadening of active stakeholder investments to include parents, communities, and businesses; and a joint responsibility for our environmental future.

Resulting themes from the Dream phase of AI were converted into Aspiration Statements for the future of the SYH project in AISD. The intent of the Aspiration Statements was to assist participants in visualizing the SYH science and math education program they really wanted. Aspiration Statements incorporated a theme the campus found exciting, protected the positive core of the project, and told the "what" of the SYH's future. The "how" of the SYH's future is addressed in Phase 3 Design.

- "By 2017 we aspire to reduce mandatory testing and implement project based learning to increase depth and complexity of learning"
- "Integration of environmental education in science"
- "Using resources between schools and across vertical teams"
- "Outdoor learning is an expectation not an option"

- "By 2017, what we most aspire to do in terms of the scope of native habitats and spaces is for there to be one within an eyeshot of any point on the outside [of a campus]"
- "The SYH program continues to grow/expand"
- "Plexiglas to protect outdoor learning tools like lecture stands, electrical outlets, seats"
- "Technology is integrated into the habitats"
- "By 2017, AISD will have outdoor learning centers and research classes open for the entire district, with the activities integrated at every grade level to encourage use"
- "Technology integrated into the outdoor classroom
- "Habitats expand into other parts of our campuses"
- "Teacher support from more/better training, administrative support, parents and community involvement, celebration of teaching"



Phase 3 Design. In Phase 3 Design, participants were asked to begin planning and preparation for taking actions to bring their Aspiration Statements to fruition. This phase was structured through formulating Provocative Propositions. Good Provocative Propositions have the following characteristics:

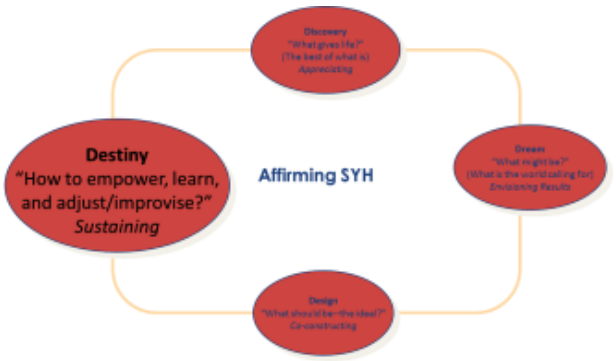
- Bridge the best of what is and what might be
- Challenge the status quo
- Be desirable for the SYH and for math and science education in AISD
- Be stated in bold and affirmative terms
- Be something people would defend if challenged
- Fit within the SYH and math/science architecture within district and state standards for learning
- Balance the management of project continuity, novelty, and transition
- Relate to the identified positive core, aspirations, and positive transformation themes of organizational effectiveness, revolutionary partnerships, innovative and adaptive environment, and academic quality and student engagement

Aspiration Statements should be carefully crafted to address what the organization would look like if it were designed in every way to maximize and preserve the themes identified as the project's strengths and desires.

Sample : "AISD's Schoolyard Habitat has created a project wherein everyone experiences himself or herself as an owner of the program—wherein everyone at all levels feels the project is his or hers to improve, change, and help become what it potentially can become. AISD's SYH program recognizes there is a big difference between owners versus hired hands. Ownership, at AISD's SYH, happens in three ways: (a) on an academic level because everyone is a shareholder and shares in the responsibility for continually evolving our outdoor education programs; (b) on a psychological level because people are authentically involved; and (3) on a district level because the big picture purpose is shared by all, and all take part at the strategic level of transformational planning."

Teachers crafted Provocative Propositions to follow their Aspiration Statements. Provocative Propositions in the SYH project are best suited to development within campus teams of SYH teachers. These proposition statements serve as goals for the future direction of the project. In the final phase, Destiny, participants were tasked with developing action plans to bring the Provocative Propositions to fruition and move the project in the direction of their positive future. Examples of the resulting Provocative Propositions included:

> "We will transform the east entrance of our campus into additional themed habitats and gardens."
>
> "We will discover better ways to grow, conserve, and generate resources within the Schoolyard Habitat."
>
> "We will learn how to integrate the SYH project with AISD's philosophy of whole child development."



Phase 4 Destiny. During the final phase of the AI cycle, Destiny, participants were charged with creating an action plan for making their positive future a reality. Due to participants' distribution across campuses, multiple representatives from each campus were not present at the AI Summit. [It took place on a Saturday morning, and teachers were compensated for attending. However, although many campuses were represented, most frequently only one teacher represented a campus.] Given that, teachers were not able to complete the Destiny phase of the AI Summit. A single team member cannot realistically develop a campus plan that determines future directions, action steps, and persons responsible for those actions. Participants reviewed the process of Destiny activities and took their training exercises back to their campuses to complete in a SYH team meeting.

During the Destiny phase, participants would be asked to begin by brainstorming goals (existing or undiscovered) that would need to occur to put the team on track to realize their vision for 2017 (i.e., a 5-year target). Backward planning would involve starting with the desired destination and thinking backward in milestones of achievement that would need to occur to reach the final 5-year Vision or Aspiration Statement. Teams would be asked to design 3-year and 1-year measurable targets and goals toward their future aspirations. Next, key action steps and scenarios would be developed for reaching the 1-year measureable targets, including activities to be completed within the next 6 months.

In closing the Destiny phase, team members would be asked to make personal commitments to the action steps and goals. Each person in the planning group would pick a part of the plan to work on and make a commitment to the group to complete it. In making a personal commitment, team members would be asked to reflect on "If YOU could do ONE THING to enhance the Schoolyard Habitat as we have captured it in our interviews/discussions/charts today, what would it be?"

Each campus would present its Aspiration Statements, Provocative Propositions, three goals, and corresponding action steps. As part of their group presentation, they would be asked to explain their designated action steps with timeframes for completion, how the plan would help them realize their Vision, how it would help them realize their science and math instructional objectives, and how they would measure the successful

implementation of their plan. They would be were asked to share one or two key activities they would undertake and share highlights of the personal commitments made by their team. Action planning worksheets and monitoring worksheets were provided in packets to help participants organize their work.

Overall, what did we learn from the AI Summit for SYHs in AISD? An AI approach was selected to explore the future of the AISD SYH projects after the completion of the initial 2-year NWF grant funding in Summer 2012. NWF grant funds, resource support, and habitat training and expertise were provided to the AISD campuses that voluntarily participated in either the 2010–2011 or 2011–2012 academic years. All but one of the campuses that chose to participate had completed training, planning, and constructing of a certified SYH. Teachers had begun exploring how to use the habitat to teach academics. As part of the NWF's expectations for this project, campuses are responsible for all maintenance, usage, curriculum development, and expansion after the completion of the award. The AI Summit offered an approach that stimulated discussion and planning about the future of the SYH projects and provided an opportunity for additional program evaluation feedback for the grant funder (NWF) and the AISD Science Department.

Teachers expressed strong enthusiasm for the SYH project. It was clear that teachers were engaged in this project and felt their students were equally motivated by the SYHs. Future planning for the SYHs focused on expansion of the initial habitats, extension of curriculum integration efforts, and engagement of the community as partners in the SYH project.

What are the key recommendations from the program evaluation? This project shows promise for AISD's science programs. A fundamental take away from the AI Summit was that teachers enjoyed and learned from the opportunity to discuss their campus SYH with others who shared a common experience. Key recommendations follow.

- Future NWF SYH partnerships should feature deliberate planning of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) structure to provide stronger unity, connectivity, access to and energy for teachers who are participating in the SYH program. For a description and guidance on the PLC approach, see http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html.
- Future NWF SYH partnerships should develop Web 2.0 tools to house resources, training, and how-to materials, sample photos, brief instructional videos, academic curriculum and lesson plans, and a virtual space for teachers to collaborate and share their progress, a SYH community identity can be fostered that will provide the kind of ongoing support and creativity that will bolster the SYH project even after the grant-funded stages have concluded. An important consideration for the NWF as it continues to expand SYH partnerships, and for AISD's Science Department now that the SYHs have been established on many campuses, is that the true value in this program will occur after participation in the initial year of training, planning, and building the SYHs has been completed. The true value of the project is not in the building, but in the using (and maintaining) of the habitats. Teachers reported in this and other evaluation components (e.g., the Teacher Survey, available online at http://www.austinisd.org/dre) that a key issue is the amount of time and attention required to plan and build the habitat, and then to integrate the new learning space into the existing curriculum. These concerns threaten the institutionalization of the project after the grant has concluded and grant staff are no longer accessible or asking for feedback. Online resources that provide training materials, videos, and other

communications can be accessed after the formal building period has concluded and will assist campus teams to maintain and extend the life of the habitat.

- NWF should facilitate and maintain access to online communities. In that way, the NWF has a complete portfolio of its work to share with funders, prospective new partner districts, and teachers in districts who are just getting started. As new schools come on board and new teachers join a current campus, the experiences of others who share in this program will be available to assist through their lessons learned, their plans, their lessons, and their successes. This approach will allow teachers to have a place to go to recall all the many resources provided during training, as well as to collaborate with others on existing and future plans long after the NWF has moved on to other new programs, as is their mission.

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