

September 12, 2016

Mr. Andrew O. Moore  
Director, Youth & Young Adult Connections  
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families  
National League of Cities  
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 550  
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Moore,

I am writing to express my support for the City of Austin's Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) Implementation Plan. We have been pleased to be a part of the preliminary informational, consensus-building and research process conducted by their planning team and working groups and I feel that this has begun to make children's equitable access to nature an increasingly high priority for the City of Austin and our partners. Although Austin is known nationally as a progressive city and we have done much to create parklands and preserve green space here, our population is experiencing increases in income inequality and access to affordable housing that are increasing neighborhood inequalities and exacerbating the nature-deficits encountered by children from low-income households. Many have come to recognize this problem and an urgent sense that something must and can be done to remedy it is beginning to emerge.

Thanks to the CCCN planning process, various departments and divisions within city government, as well as representatives from diverse health, education and non-profit sectors, have come together to forge and strengthen relationships across "silos" and sectors that were either nonexistent or weak before the process began. We have achieved a broad consensus regarding the need for equitable and abundant access to nature in every Austin neighborhood and the need to help everyone understand the importance of exposure to nature and outdoor play in healthy child development. There is also now an agreement that city codes and school curricula need to be redesigned to expand opportunities for outdoor play in green spaces that are proximate to where lower income children live and go to school, and to allow more frequent and longer duration experiences in them.

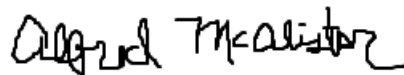
Our plan to focus on improving and expanding green space in school yards and to link them together into a new network of school parks has the potential to transform the everyday life of nature-deprived children in ways that will bring immediate and long term benefits. These are likely to include improved school attendance and achievement, better mental health, and reduced threats to physical health such as obesity, inactivity and substance abuse.

As a public health and behavioral scientist, I am particularly pleased that the Austin CCCN plan will include a strong research and evaluation component in which we will measure changes in physical environments and access to high quality green space, observable changes in the behavior of children in areas where those improvements are made, changes in children's ratings of restorative outcomes from outdoor experiences and in the degree to which they value and want to protect nature. Among students in the areas where changes are made we will also study improvements in attitudes toward school, school attendance and achievement, and evaluate effects on physical activity and in risks of obesity and substance abuse.

At a citywide level, I am very enthusiastic about the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights resolution that CCCN will bring to the city council later this autumn. This will mark the launch of a vigorous public awareness campaign to help everyone understand how profoundly connection with nature influences healthy child development. With that as a starting point, we will promote greater utilization of both existing and newly improved green spaces by lower income children and their families—and build support among taxpayers for investing in further improvements in quality and access to nature in lower income neighborhoods here.

I will welcome the opportunity to collaborate intensively with the National League of Cities, the Children & Nature Network, and the six cohort cities to explore and evaluate new approaches for cities and multi-sectorial collaborations within them to institutionalize equity and dramatically enhance the abundance of nature access for all children. We have the potential to make a big difference in the everyday experiences and healthy development of children here in Austin and to provide a well-documented and evaluated model for other cities seeking innovation. We can also add an important regional voice to the growing national consensus in support of national, state and local policies that can strengthen children's connections with nature.

Sincerely,



Alfred L. McAlister, Ph.D.  
Professor of Behavioral Sciences