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Office of Senator Martin Heinrich
400 Gold Avenue SW, Ste. 1080
Albuquerque, N.M. 87102

July 29, 2022

Re: Endorsement of the Living Schoolyard Act and outdoor education opportunities

Dear Senator Martin Heinrich,

As the regional field office for the National Audubon Society, Audubon Southwest protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow, using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. Audubon's state programs, nature centers, chapters, and partners have an unparalleled wingspan that reaches millions of people each year to inform, inspire, and unite diverse communities in conservation action.

Audubon Southwest fully supports the creation of the Living Schoolyards Act and any additional support to help teachers and students learn outdoors, especially on their home campuses. Audubon works with 5,000 students each year through our outdoor programming at the Randall Davey Audubon Center and Wildlife Sanctuary in Santa Fe. While we create meaningful outdoor experiences out on the trail, we recognize that we cannot do this work alone. We collaborate with teachers and Santa Fe Public Schools to provide hands-on professional development opportunities, as well as expertise about installing outdoor classrooms. We train over 50 teachers each year in outdoor, hands-on learning techniques that connect standards-aligned lessons with birds, wildlife, and conservation. The most meaningful work we do is often showing teachers how to use their schoolyard for science, ELA, and other types of learning.

Last week during our 5th annual Santa Fe Outdoor Education Collaborative summer workshop, a teacher said, "We really need to get our kids outside. Even just investigating around our school campus helps them see the science connections and recognize that there's nature everywhere, even right here. We all need to be better connected to ourselves, each other, and the natural world, especially after the last two years [of the pandemic]. We really need this every day, not just once a year during a field trip."

In addition to having a dedicated outdoor learning space for students, schoolyard improvements can also be beneficial for birds and wildlife. Increased native plants used in landscaping, shade trees, water sources, school gardens, and shade structures can all help create more bird-friendly habitat on school campuses. What's good for our kids is often good for wildlife as well.

The Living Schoolyard Act would help facilitate outdoor learning spaces in communities like ours. Teachers need the tools and spaces to ensure outdoor learning happens every day, not just once a year on a field trip, and this bill would help facilitate those experiences. Audubon endorses Senator Heinrich's efforts to continue serving our students and teachers both in New Mexico and across the country.

Sincerely,

Katherine Weeks
Director of Community Education
Audubon Southwest