

# The Welch Outdoor Learning Center

## Hands-on historical fun at Katy ISD's unique education facility

Written by Elizabeth Padgett and Katy Magazine's Editors | Select photography by Joni DeShazier

Established in 1981, the Welch Outdoor Learning Center (OLC) is a one-of-a-kind facility that pushes the boundaries of education and takes the fun of learning to new heights. The center strives to provide both science and social studies lessons to Katy ISD students, while also incorporating a fun, stimulating learning environment. The OLC is named after Kenneth Welch who served as its director from 1981 to 1994. Of his time at the OLC, Welch says, "I most enjoyed seeing the children who were born and raised in the city having an opportunity to see and do things in an outdoor setting that they might not have otherwise."

Located about a quarter-mile west of the Katy ISD administration building on 34.5 acres of land, the property includes science and history classrooms, museums, a large barnyard with a variety of farm animals, a garden, and a pond. The facility provides students with unique educational opportunities.

Welch shares the challenges of the early days at the OLC. "The first few years were somewhat difficult as we started having students there before any of the buildings were constructed. Ray Wolman, the former OLC director, and I had a crew of high school boys who helped us clear the trails, and the school maintenance men were working on the roads and ponds," recalls Welch. The idea for the center was birthed by former Superintendent Gordon Brown and former School Board President Dr. James William. When the property became available, the pair put into motion the beginnings of what is now the only school owned and operated facility of its kind in the state of Texas.

### Field Trips and Baby Chicks

Paul Dunk, current outdoor learning center specialist, sees to the daily administration of the Welch OLC. "This includes working with students, parents, teachers, and administrators to make sure that the facility effectively supports and benefits the Katy ISD community," says Dunk.



OLC specialist Paul Dunk, Ray Wolman, Kenneth Welch, OLC coordinator Howard Grimet, and OLC caretaker Tim Ripperger

Located within the center are history and science classrooms geared toward fourth-grade level lessons. The history classroom is made up of a historical museum and a one-room schoolhouse, which serves as a simulation in teaching about pioneer life, including artifact data-gathering investigations. The science classroom is host to a diverse collection of exhibits, displaying specimens used to demonstrate adaptation in living organisms. According to Dunk, "Six learning stations allow students to work in small

groups as they experience the OLC." Lessons are teacher-led, and volunteering parents assist. "In addition, the Outdoor Adventure Education and Angler Club programs help support Katy ISD elementary physical education students through fishing events and field trips." Though the OLC focuses on a fourth-graders' education level, first-grade students also get to participate in an outreach incubator chick hatching lesson.

### Katy Life

When Welch and his wife Sarah moved to Katy in the fall of 1961, he started a career with Katy ISD that would span 34 years. Starting off at Katy Junior High as a coach and teacher for 10 years, he then became the principal for another 10 years. When the idea was formed for the OLC, he says, "I promptly requested to be considered for the job as director."



Katy ISD health and physical education curriculum coordinator  
Howard Grimet shows students how to measure their catch



Students learn about the anatomy of fish with  
hands-on experiences at the Welch OLC



**Kenneth D.  
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Students try their hand at canoeing in the Welch OLC pond  
while learning about water safety and natural resources



In addition to pond water quality analysis,  
students also get to fish from the pier



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Kenneth worked at the OLC for 14 years, retiring in December 1994 and now resides in Rusk, Texas.

During their time at the OLC, the Welch family lived in the Caretaker's Cottage. They have two grown children, Wendy and David. Nowadays, the cottage is home to Tim and Julie Ripperger. Tim is a coach and teacher at Katy High School, and Julie teaches at Katy Junior High. "The Ripperger family helps with the upkeep of the OLC, tends to the animals, and helps to keep an eye on things after hours," says Dunk.

## Experiencing Outdoor Adventures

Every school year, the center supports 12 elementary and secondary fishing clubs and 13 outdoor adventure education field trips. These field trips include fishing, pond water quality analysis, boater safety, making fish print T-shirts, camping skills, nature bling, and much more.

While the OLC is not open to the public on a daily basis, there are opportunities for the community to experience the facility grounds including the summer recreation program, numerous Boy Scout events, and the annual Folk Life Festival. This year marked the 30th year of the Folk Life Festival during which the center was transported back to the 1800s, allowing visitors to partake in popular scenes of the past. Some of the activities hosted included blacksmith demonstrations, archery, honey bee keeping, spinning and quilting, Texas cowboy camp, and Native American life. The grounds were also filled with era-appropriate musicians such as dulcimer, fiddle, and bagpipe players.

Superintendent Alton Frailey shares that the facility serves as a venue that provides "exceptional learning experiences focused on fostering student success." The educational support will continue to help future Katyites. He adds, "It is a place where students have an opportunity to learn from doing, touching, and watching all in a location that provides a meaningful change of pace and place from their typical classroom setting." **KM**

*ELIZABETH PADGETT is a professional writer and is already marking her calendar for next year's Folk Life Festival.*

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Katy ISD's OLC specialist Paul Dunk oversees daily administration and operations of the facilities that benefits Katy students





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