

House Appropriations and Education Committees Testimonial
National Aviary
Thursday, October 5

Good afternoon. I'm Cathy Schlott, Director of Animal Programs and Experiences at the National Aviary. I'm honored to provide my testament to the importance of Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program funding. This funding is vital to our ability to offer educational experiences that connect what students learn in the classroom to birds and wildlife. EITC funds provide the Aviary with the resources to offer relevant programs to urban and rural students who may not otherwise have the ability to participate. In the 2021-2022 school year alone, the National Aviary served more than 30 school districts spread across 13 counties in the Commonwealth.

The National Aviary visits rural schools annually in Washington and Westmoreland counties to provide educational programs in their communities. Each standards-based program is targeted to specific age groups ranging from preschool to high school. Featuring live animals, they highlight STEAM subjects to help students understand how science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math are used in wildlife conservation work.

For example, in the "Owls" program, students learn about global biodiversity by exploring wide diversity of owls around the world, including the seven species that they can find in their Western PA communities. They connect to classroom science standards by examining owl adaptations such as their specialized feathers that allow them to fly silently. These concepts are then brought to life when students meet a live owl ambassador.

During “Birds and Conservation,” high school students take an in depth look at case studies on threats to wild birds, such as pesticide use and invasive species and explore how the National Aviary and partner organizations are working to protect birds from these challenges.

The rural outreach programs, funded in part by EQT Foundation and EITC monies, have reached more than 11,000 students since the 2018/2019 school year – all at no charge to the schools. In 2023, our education team has already conducted 68 outreach programs, and more than 860 students will be educated by these programs by year end. Outreach programs are important and are key to our accessibility initiatives because they reduce transportation and funding barriers that many rural and urban schools must navigate.

In addition to outreach programs, local families enjoy free evening visits with educational presentations during Pittsburgh Neighbor Nights at the Aviary every third Thursday of the month. Neighbor Nights include a meet and greet with one of our ambassador animals and a take home craft. We partner with community organizations to ensure that the families attending are from low-income groups.

A robust calendar of special events provides children and families with new ways to have fun learning about our animals. Sensory Friendly Mornings provide free Aviary experiences that support the needs of children with sensory processing challenges.

Finally, I’d like to mention an educational program offered for free that is near and dear to my heart and is made possible by EITC funding. Our One Northside For Every Student program is offered to second grade students from eight schools on the North Side of Pittsburgh. It includes two in-school programs and one field

trip to the National Aviary. In addition, each classroom receives binoculars, bird feeder supplies, and a local bird field guide to encourage them to extend their learning about their backyard birds. At the end of the program, students and their families from all eight of our partner schools attend a Family Showcase where students explore the Aviary's immersive habitats with their families and, the students share their classroom projects and artwork inspired by their Aviary experiences. Dinner is provided during this evening event to help reduce barriers to participation. 163 parents and children attended our last Family Showcase. One teacher said, "My students were excited to be there, and the Aviary had great ways of engaging my children at a level they could understand." It's wonderful to see the students take on the role of the expert, sharing what they have learned about the birds in the Aviary with their families.

So far in 2023, 29 schools or community organizations have come or are booked free of charge, including 13 visits through the One Northside program, which will serve nearly 360 students.

We also cannot overestimate the value of field trips to the National Aviary. Visitors see firsthand the magnificent species that inhabit our planet. Students learn that protecting the environment not only saves wildlife, but also is directly connected to human health. Through signage, keeper talks, and animal encounters, they are immersed in and learn the importance of nature. This year already, we have reached 306 school or community groups, 78 of which were provided free or reduced admission.

All of these educational touchpoints are made possible in part by EITC funding, and while the requests for assistance are increasing, our EITC funding has steadily

decreased over the last five years. Last year, the allocation of \$21,500 was 50 percent of what was received in 2018. Thus far, in 2023, we've received \$7,500, which is nearly one third of what we received last year.

I hope that you will consider increasing EITC funding in the future so that we can reach more underserved communities in the state with valuable programs that literally bring their classroom lessons to life.