

Discover Others: Field trips help students meet diverse community



Migration Celebration at the Lab of Ornithology.



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Middle school is a big feat for many for many pre-teens. It calls for braces, awkward growth spurts and the hardest feat of all: making new friends.

The Discovery Trail, in collaboration with the Ithaca City School District (ICSD) and the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI), offers the program *Kids Discover the Trail!* (KDT), which aims to makes this transitional phase easier for ICSD students.

Children from the eight different elementary schools interact with each other through cross-school buddy programs and curriculum-based field trips on the Discovery Trail from pre-kindergarten to sixth grade.

For each Discovery Trail visit, an elementary school class is paired with another class from a different ICSD school. The students from different classes are then paired up individually.

“[ICSD] is very diverse. There was a lack of understanding between suburban, rural and urban kids. There’s more understanding now because of their shared experiences,” said Mary Maxon Grainger, a member of the IPEI and the KDT advisory committee.

A KDT trip varies depending on the grade of the students. The trail includes eight different locations: the Cayuga Nature Center, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Cornell Plantations, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Museum of the Earth at the Paleontological Research Institute, Sciencenter, The History Center of Tompkins County, and Tompkins County Public Library.

The Discovery Trail was created in an effort to promote awareness of the programs held at the different sites to foster an understanding of the connections among science, nature, and culture. It intends to encourage visitors of all ages to pursue self-directed learning outside the classroom.

Grainger believes that it is necessary for students across the district to meet each other through the Discovery Trail before they go secondary school. This will help the students to create relationships that will ultimately make them more comfortable as they move through the ICSD education system.

“I brought my kids up in Ithaca because of its diversity. This program prepares them for middle school, but also most likely for the real world. It exposes them to people that they might not have interacted with previously, which provides them with more compassion for those different than them,” Grainger said.

Teachers and administrators in the district noticed a lack of consistency during a roundtable discussion regarding “critical issues in education.” In an effort to mend that problem, KDT was created and piloted at the ICSD elementary schools. The program is voluntary and has had 100 percent participation from the classrooms since it began.

Randi Beckmann, the teacher liaison for KDT, was one of the first ICSD teachers to partake in the program. She said that having these trips are fundamental to students at a young age.

“The earlier the students have experiences with fellow classmates different from themselves, the sooner they learn to value those experiences, friendships and differences. With that, they can use those things to develop and grow as they age,” Beckmann said.

Beckmann initiated the Buddy Up program that works with the KDT initiative to further the relationship between the students from different elementary schools. The children participate in activities before the trip, such as writing letters to each other or partaking in social activities like bowling. Over 25,000 students have participated in KDT since it began, and over 100 classrooms utilize the Buddy Up program in addition to the trail.

The ICSD conducted a survey in 2011 asking sixth graders to reflect on their experiences with the KDT program. Beckmann said the responses were overwhelmingly positive, not only about the trail, but about what Ithaca has to offer in general.

“Any experience we can give children that brings them out of themselves to a greater sense of understanding of the world around them, their geography, people, and other places is a profoundly important skill that will certainly impact them later in life,” the Belle Sherman teacher said.

It is continuing to expand to other school districts across Tompkins County and is currently in place at the Groton, Lansing, Newfield, and Trumansburg central school districts. Foundation, business, and IPEI and Discovery Trail donations provide funding for the program.

“Many children have never been able to go to these places before and otherwise would not have gone without the program. We’re now speaking to an equity issue,” Beckmann said. “Our goal is that we are preparing them to be citizens of this world who are open and understanding and respectful.” §