

Full Circle Celebration for Kids Discover the Trail

By Bill Chaisson | Posted: Tuesday, May 8, 2012 4:56 pm

On Saturday, May 12 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. all of the Discovery Trail sites will be holding a “Full Circle Celebration” in recognition of the fact that this year's local fifth graders are the first to have officially visited all eight of the trail participating institutions. There will be special hands-on activities for parents and children, and three buses will be running between sites – starting at each elementary school – to make sure that everyone who wants to participate is able to do so.

The Discovery Trail came together in 1999 to formalize the relationships among the public library system, local museums, and the school districts. In 2005 the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI), a local non-profit, developed Kids Discover the Trail (KDT) in cooperation with the school district and the Discovery Trail. In 8 years of KDT, 800 classes totalling over 15,000 children visited Discovery Trail sites.

“The idea started to percolate to develop a program to get all the elementary school kids to all of the sites,” said Mary Grainger, the current development committee chair for the IPEI board of directors. “The Community and Triad foundations asked IPEI to organize a discussion about the uneven distribution of resources among districts. The amount of access depended on personal connections.”

IPEI looked at the state standards and figured out how they best dovetailed with the resources of each Discovery Trail site. Grainger, who served on the committee that devised Kids Discover the Trail, said that IPEI is proud that their recommendations have been accepted by teachers, administrators, and school boards throughout the region.

The non-profit was formed in response to an objective included the Ithaca City Schools strategic plan of 1996. The school district asked for help to find needed resources for all students in the district. “We didn't start out to be a fundraising organization,” said Grainger. “That was a response to belt-tightening in the schools.” IPEI raised \$10,000 to distribute to teachers to supplement district money for programming, which Grainger said “whetted their appetite” for more.

The mission of IPEI is to supplement existing funding in order to enhance the quality of programming. “We spend money to boost education outside the core curriculum,” said Grainger. “Its boosts teacher morale.

Although the organization is focussed on Ithaca City Schools, other teachers who find out about it also approach IPEI for advice. Programs analogous to Kids Discover the Trail are developing in the districts around Ithaca. Its equivalent in Trumansburg is called Kids Explore and Discover.

IPEI is not a foundation, but it sometimes seems like one, according to Grainger. “We serve as an umbrella organization for individuals or families who want to set up an award,” she said. “IPEI invests the money for them in perpetuity.”

On Saturday morning, starting at 9:30 a.m. three buses will be leaving from Caroline, Fall Creek, and Cayuga Heights elementary schools and stopping at all four other elementary campuses before going on to visit all eight Discovery Trail sites: Tompkins County Public Library, the History Center, Cornell Plantations, the Lab of Ornithology, the Johnson Museum of Art, Cayuga Nature Center, Museum of the Earth, and the Sciencenter.

Details of the Full Circle programs are available at the kidsdiscoverthetrail.org website.