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Connecting Classrooms Grant Supported Caroline Wilderness Campus Celebration

Around Town Written by Mary Grainger



IPEI, the Ithaca Public Education Initiative, awarded the first ever Connecting Classrooms Grants to groups of Ithaca City School District (ICSD) teachers last spring and many of the funded activities continue during the new school year. One such example is the “Caroline Wilderness Campus Curriculum Initiative” led by Caroline Elementary School Principal Mary Grover and involving classroom teachers from all grade levels and the school’s music and art teachers.

Last May Caroline held its first annual daylong “Celebration of Learning” throughout the school’s unique, outdoor space known as the “Wilderness Campus”. According to parent Terezka Korinek: “Awe-inspiring student work was shared throughout the day. It was an integrated, school-wide opportunity for PreK-5 th grade students to showcase various projects that resulted from their learning about a particular nature, science or

engineering topic.”

Students were stationed along the trail equipped with what they would share with other Caroline students and with visiting family members and friends. For example, some students educated attendees about the animals and insects present in the school’s wilderness with videos that they recorded after conducting research. Digital tablets connected to the district’s outdoors wireless network were used to share the student videos.

Janie Moon Clark, retired Caroline teacher who supported creation of the “Wilderness Campus”, has also been involved with this grant’s curriculum development that can be used by Caroline teachers as well as by teachers from other ICSD schools. Lessons feature Animal Detectives, Water Cycle and Flooding, Bird Migration and Adaptations, and Trout-Life Cycle. The “Celebration of Learning” included unveiling of a new trail sign for the outdoor campus donated by the families of students who completed Grade 5 in 2014. In recognition for her leadership, the trail sign is dedicated to Clark.

Grover applied for the Connecting Classrooms Grant in order to access funds to help develop an “integrated school-wide approach to support a culture of student learning which builds students’ persistence, collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, communication skills and independence.” Caroline teachers have participated in a district-wide initiative to support the creation of interdisciplinary, units of study aligned with the current learning standards.

Grover’s goals include supporting and nurturing instructional shifts that engage and empower students, providing students with authentic opportunities to share learning that bring standards to life, and giving educators the time and support to write curriculum that reflects a clear understanding of standards and our district’s instructional shifts.

“One thing that was especially inspiring was how everyone throughout the school was engaged,” expressed Grover who described students who were excited to share their learning with everyone. “This grant helped push us to be a community of learners right up until the final days of the spring semester. My colleagues in other buildings are looking to replicate the ‘Celebration of Learning’ model in ways that work for their schools, too.”

Korinek joined Grover in expressing gratitude to IPEI for funding its proposal as a Connecting Classrooms Grant. “Caroline’s industrious teachers worked intensively over a three-month period to design and implement new and inspirational curricula,” she said. “Classrooms became a string of birdfeeders hanging on tree boughs outside a nearby window; or a rotten log covered with mold, myriad invertebrates, and moss. Other classrooms were held on the tip of a flowering aster watching as a bumblebee sipped nectar and next exploring elephant dung to learn how seeds were dispersed on the plains of Africa. Some classes encircled the bark of oak and sycamore trees and then cast visions upward to explore bare-branched canopies just as the buds began to appear. Paper mâché animals, cradled with care by their makers, looked for food and shelter within the woodland campus. Adaptive features of various wildlife species were highlighted near Six Mile Creek and accessed on the web with student experts reporting.”

The Connecting Classrooms Grants program is IPEI’s newest grants offering for teachers, staff and others with ideas for enhancing educational opportunities for ICSD students. Five grants totaling \$34,950 were funded according to IPEI Grants Committee Chair Connie Patterson. “IPEI is pleased and excited to support these fantastic proposals that find new ways to get students actively involved in learning and discovery. Each project was created by a group of educators who have chosen to focus on scientific content while incorporating language arts, math, and technology. We are impressed with the teachers’ vision and commitment!” said Patterson, an IPEI board member and retired educator.

Connecting Classrooms Grants build on IPEI’s successful models for encouraging and supporting innovative teaching and deeper learning.

“Our intent is to be the catalyst for ICSD staff to seek and develop innovative collaborative partnerships between teachers within a school, across grade levels and/or between schools,” according to Patterson. “It’s about working together,” said IPEI Executive Director Christine Sanchirico. “This is really our guiding principle for the new grants.”



IPEI initiated Connecting Classrooms Grants using funds IPEI received from generous community members who donated to its Our Children * Our Schools * Our Future campaign. One of the capital campaign’s three goals was to expand programs and grants. IPEI’s other grants programs are funded by the Annual Fund and Adult Spelling Bee.

Connecting Classrooms Grants help recipients to plan, develop, and implement their visions that are aligned with the grant criteria including internal collaboration among ICSD staff; identification of overall promise or potential of project aligned with school and district goals; plan encourages active learning and student engagement; realistic, thoughtful outline of process; proposed budget aligns with project goals and intended outcomes; potential for academic impact; and process for effective evaluation of the project. Patterson added that applicants first should consider whether the request fits into IPEI’s other grant categories (Teacher Grants, and Red and Gold Grants).

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