

Parents Recognize the Benefits of KDT

By Heather Zimar

This is the latest in a series of articles marking the 10th anniversary of Kids Discover the Trail!

When Kate Supron observed her son's Cayuga Heights Elementary School classmates read and write letters to their Kids Discover the Trail! (KDT) Ithaca buddies at Enfield Elementary School, she was impressed by the connections made between students from different schools.

"Cayuga Heights is economically diverse, but there are really no kids from rural areas," Supron says. "With their letters to and from pen pals at Enfield, I remember one girl being very surprised by her buddy telling her she liked to hunt and had her own bow, which was pink."

The letter writing—one of the many activities that makes up the KDT experience—gave Supron the opportunity to talk with her son and his friends about differences and stereotypes. "They joked that kids from Enfield might think having a tennis racket was as strange as they thought having a hunting bow was," she says.

KDT a collaboration among the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI), the Ithaca City School District (ICSD) and the Discovery Trail (DT). This year is the 10th anniversary of the program, which gives every district student the opportunity to visit a DT site each year during elementary school. KDT partners all 3,000 Ithaca students in more than 150 classrooms with another elementary school classroom at the same grade level for the field trips and pre- and post-trip activities.

Fostering relationships among students who come from different backgrounds, but who will come together in middle school, is a key component of KDT, and one of the many reasons parents say they support this educational program.

"Getting matched up with a buddy from another school has always been exciting for my kids," says Lauren Loiacono, a parent of three Caroline Elementary School students. "They enjoy being pen pals with their buddy in anticipation of the trips and then getting to meet them."

She adds, "As a parent, I am so grateful that my



During a KDT trip to the Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell, young students are accompanied by their parents.

children have the opportunity to experience this wide variety of educational field trips with their classmates, as well as students from other school communities. As my fifth-graders transition to middle school next year, it is my most sincere hope that they will see more familiar faces in those very unfamiliar hallways because of their buddy experiences through KDT."

Asia Bonacci, a parent of two Fall Creek Elementary students, says her fifth-grade daughter has expressed excitement over the years about meeting a new friend and seeing the friend's school. "The KDT program is a great way to introduce area kids to all the wonders of living in and around Ithaca," she says. "The buddy system, in particular, broadens their tiny elemen-

tary school experience to include other kids from all over the community—suddenly they become citizens of a much larger world."

Parents also emphasize the access provided by the program. "KDT exposes students to their community and its opportunities," Supron says. "Many would not visit these places without being taken through KDT, which creates a common base of experience and exposure."

Loiacono, who has chaperoned many trips, agrees. "I have been able to witness a number of my children's classmates experience community resources to which they otherwise would not have been exposed," she says. "KDT field trips give every student in the Ithaca schools the opportunity to experience a variety of educational gems in our community. These trips are so important to help establish common experience among all students, regardless of socio-economic background and access to transportation and other means."

"It is a wonderful way to open up to the kids what is right here in the community," South Hill Elementary School parent Julie Biehn adds.

KDT also emphasizes experiential learning. For example, Loiacono, who recently attended her daughter's field trip to the Sciencenter, said she loved watching the students plan, build, and rebuild wind turbines. "There was such excitement buzzing in the room as the students determinedly adjusted their blades and tested their turbines in front of the fans," she says.

Loiacono adds, "Another experience that stands out for me is the fourth-grade trip to the Eight Square Schoolhouse. Packing a time-period-appropriate lunch and dressing in 19th century garb was both educational and fun. My then-fourth-graders kept comparing notes about their handwriting lessons and how the 'old-fashioned teacher' talked to their classes."

"KDT has exposed my boys to their local environment—historical, natural, social and cultural," Supron says. "The program shows students that learning takes place beyond the classroom. It links the work they do in school to the 'real world.'"

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