



IPEI & CHES Bring Back Rockets

For many years, teacher Steve Ryan taught third-graders at Cayuga Heights Elementary School (CHES) the art of rocket-making. After his retirement three years ago, the program was discontinued, except for an afterschool enrichment class that served only a few students. This year, with the help of Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) Red and Gold Grants, the rocket program is back.

“I love the fact that rockets are returning to CHES,” said Principal Brad Pollack. “I am delighted that building and launching rockets is being offered in third grade to all of our students. Rocket launching is a great way to enhance math and science skills, in a very real, hands-on, tangible way. In addition, students have the opportunity to experience the joys of invention, creation, experimentation, and discovery.”

This spring, as part of the IPEI grant, Ryan has been visiting CHES as a community partner and teaching nearly 50 third-graders how to build rockets from scratch using balsa wood, cardboard tubes, string, and plastic bags. Students are learning how to use tools such as rasps, saws, and sandpaper to measure materials and shape the wood. The classes will launch their completed rockets later this spring. “There’s a lot of listening and cooperating that goes into it,” Ryan said. “When the students are done, there’s a real sense of accomplishment. There’s a lot of connection to standards, and on top of that, it’s really fun.”

Both Snow and Graber noted that students at all skill levels benefit from this project. “Even someone who is struggling academically can shine in this area,” Snow said. Graber added, “I love how my kids who are academically challenged in other areas can feel successful; they don’t always have those opportunities.”

Hill noted that the students are learning that the care and attention they put into the project has an impact on its outcome. “It’s their rocket. They’ll see it does make a difference how much effort they put in. It’s a lot of accuracy and measurement, physics, science and math. It’s a great combination of skills.”