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Books, pizza bring Northeast, Caroline students together

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Sandra Rouleau's kindergarten class at Northeast Elementary School clamors through the door, dismantling the neat piles of toys.

They soon gather around Rouleau, who pulls out the book, "Pete's a Pizza" and the children immediately become quiet. They spend the next few minutes mesmerized, recalling their trip to Papa John's and to the Tompkins County Public Library with other kindergarteners from Caroline Elementary.

"I liked eating pizza," Ruby Barnett-Hill, said.

Hands shoot up across the circle. Phoebe Shin talks about the fun she had reading with her partner.

"We had buddies and my buddy was Haley," Shin said.

The group chatters excitedly about their field trip to see how pizza is made. They rave about the books they read at the library after eating, too.

The trip was organized by the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI), a non-profit organization dedicated to providing extra support and community interaction to students in the Ithaca City School District.

The trip is part of the "Kids Discover the Trail" program, which brings children throughout the district to area treasures such as the library and museums, and sponsors get-togethers to help increase social interaction before students transition from elementary to middle school.

After students graduate from one of the eight ICSD elementary schools, they are funneled into two middle schools. That means students from rural areas suddenly find themselves in the same classroom as kids from downtown Ithaca, creating potentially difficult situations for both groups.

"There's conflict. There's definitely biases we're trying to dispel," Rouleau said.

Rouleau's class trip to Papa John's with Caroline helps students start addressing the demographic issue at a young age. It is part of IPEI's mission to connect the schools with the community. More than 2,800 students participate in Kids Discover the Trail, visiting the eight Discovery Trail sites.

Rouleau said the more time kids from different demographic groups spend with each other early on, the easier the transition to middle school becomes, and that exploration outside the classroom is a great way to meet each other.

"The younger you start, the better they can form the impression of, 'Oh, yeah, they're just like us, they've got the same things in the classrooms,'" Rouleau said. "We talked about what's the same and what's different, so we visit each others' rooms and they realize the rooms are pretty much the same."

The Kids Discover the Trail experiences continue throughout elementary school, with students from different grade levels accessing the resources of the Discovery Trail organizations with educational experiences that are grade-level appropriate.

Kindergarteners at Northeast make the trip to Papa John's once a year. The students read books and learn where their food comes from in preparation for the trip.

The trip culminates with a visit to the library. The Northeast kids pair with a student from Caroline, read stories with each other, go on a scavenger hunt and learn how use the library's resources. Everyone gets their own library card for future visits. At the end of the day, they each get the book "Library Lion" to take home.

Amy Becker, a teacher from Northeast, thinks one of the best parts of the program is the friendships the children forge. Not only do they spend the day together, but some even write letters or send photos to each other to cement relationships.

"They start friendships, which is wonderful, because then when they go to middle school they know other children who they've just been with all throughout their education," Becker said.
