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Fall Creek Elementary teams up with Museum of the Earth for science program

By Mary Michalow •Correspondent • May 27, 2010, 6:45 pm

ITHACA -- As you enter Fall Creek Elementary School, ceramic tiles decorate the hallway space. The tiles are remnants of an innovative program where an "artist-in-residence" came to the school and helped every student create a tile.

These art and dance residencies have become a great feature of Ithaca schools, but this year Fall Creek is trying a new scientist-in-residence program in collaboration with the Museum of the Earth.

"Traditional science fairs don't give every child a chance to participate," said Karen Keller, Fall Creek's principal. Parental involvement or available supplies at home can vary greatly from child to child, affecting a student's ability to complete a science fair project, she said.

To get every student actively involved in science this year, a parent group wrote grants for the project, which were funded by the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI).

"They are our heroes," Keller said of IPEI, "and the Museum of the Earth."

Museum of the Earth staff met with Fall Creek staff to develop curricula for the visits to the school. Each grade level will be treated to two or three visits from museum staff members, taking place from May 3 through Friday.

Kindergarten students will participate in a re-created dinosaur dig, finding real and replicated dinosaur bones in two plastic swimming pools filled with sand. During their second visit, the students will color and decorate life-size dinosaurs for their classrooms.

First-, second- and fifth-grade students will learn about the Ice Age. They will talk about the climate and what animals lived during the time of mastodons and mammoths. They'll also participate in the Hyde Park Mastodon Project, sifting through

matrix (soil, rock, fossils and organic material) to learn more about the environment in which the Hyde Park Mastodon was found and excavated by the Museum of the Earth in 1999. Second graders will take a field trip to the museum to see the mastodon and other exhibits. Fifth graders will serve as buddies to the younger students when working with the matrix.

"I'm excited about looking through the dirt," said Ayla de Boer, a first-grader in Chris Bell's class, "because I like to get dirty."

"I'm excited because I've seen the 'Ice Age' movies and I really wanted to learn about them and now I get to," said Isabel Chang, also a student in Bell's class.

Third- and fourth-graders will learn about the Devonian period and the sea that covered central New York 360 million years ago. They will look at fossils of corals and brachiopods, take a trip to Ithaca Falls to make observations and search for fossils in shale bins.

"We're really excited about it," Keller said of the program. "The staff is excited. The parents who have worked on it are so complimentary of the Museum of the Earth."

Michalow is a Park Scholar at Ithaca College whose community service component includes communications projects for the Ithaca City School District.

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