

180 Days of Thinking with ICSD

Day 93: Discovering the Community-Zoya Segelbacher, Cornell Student and IPEI Intern

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Back in 2004, when school budgets were shrinking and there was a concern about community connections and engagement, interested parties came together in the form of a “critical issues in education roundtable” hosted by the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI), the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, and the Triad Foundation. Much of the discussion revolved around equal access to resources for people from all socio-economic backgrounds. One result of the meeting was *Kids Discover the Trail! (KDT!)*, a collaboration between IPEI, the

individual units of the Discovery Trail and the Ithaca City School District (ICSD). Almost 10 years after that critical meeting, I met with Jennifer Engel, Vice President of the IPEI, to talk about *KDT!*.

When asked to discuss the ways in which *KTD!* overcomes socio-economic barriers, Jennifer informed me that kids are able to discover the trail at no cost to their parents. Having generous community members, organizations, local businesses, banks and the Discovery Trail as sponsors, makes it possible for all children to go on the trips. *KDT!* also overcomes socio-economic barriers by exposing parents to resources available in the community that they might not have otherwise known about.

The trips to the Discovery Trail sites are valuable because they allow children to expand their knowledge and connect their hands-on experiences with book learning and in-class demonstrations. This makes learning more accessible and real. Jennifer is a firm believer that “when you talk about wildflowers, when you hear about wildflowers, when you touch and draw wildflowers” that improves and increases learning beyond what reading an encyclopedia could ever teach you.

This tactile and visual learning is especially important for the pre-k students who are learning about colors and art mediums. To reinforce their knowledge of colors, pre-k children visit the Johnson Museum of Art and view the artwork. Besides the growth and learning that takes place on these trips, the experience of being in pre-k and going to a museum is itself important because these children will go back in the future. Instead of feeling intimidated by museums and viewing them as large buildings where they are not welcome, they gain a sense of familiarity from a young age.

Between the community engagement, equal access, and infinite experiences and learning opportunities, it is no wonder that “within the first two years of its existence, there was 100% participation in the program.” This shows that “in every school, pre-k through grade 5, teachers believe in the educational value and the goals of *KDT!*, enough to integrate *KDT!* into their teaching

objectives." Even though *KDT!* trips often occur during the same time as testing, and they require extra work for teachers, like taking the children out of school and making sure that the curriculum surrounding *KDT!* coordinates with state standards, they fully and wholeheartedly embrace the program.

To the best of Jennifer's knowledge, "this is the only program of its kind on the planet. It is extremely unique because of the collaboration between the three units (ICSD, the Discovery Trail, and IPEI) which makes *KDT!* possible."

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