

News and Notes

Updates and briefs from around the area

By Ithaca Child

IPEI-Funded Programs Increase Student Engagement

The Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) now has research-based evidence for what it has always believed: the programs and activities that it funds through grants to teachers and schools are effective at increasing student engagement.

Data from reports submitted by teachers who were awarded grants during the 2012-13 school year show that Ithaca City School District (ICSD) students' engagement rose by an average of nearly 50 percent following an IPEI grant-funded activity.

For students identified as "performing below grade level," the average increase in engagement was even higher, almost doubling after participation in IPEI-funded programs, as measured by classroom teachers.

IPEI Grants Committee Chair Pat Tempesta stated, "The research is clear: active student engagement is an important indicator for learning. As an organization, IPEI is pleased to see that our grants are a successful tool for teachers as they continue their work with our students."

"Engaging our students in learning when they are young will open up so many opportunities for them throughout their lives," said Christine

Sanchirico, IPEI's executive director. "They will be more inclined to become self-motivated by personal interest in their studies and ultimately in their careers."

Terry Byrnes, president of IPEI's board of directors, expressed that "IPEI grants engage students' creative energies and awaken their imaginations, all of which makes a positive difference in student learning. Teachers have told us this for years—but now we have more concrete evidence. With continued community support, we will make many more IPEI grants in the future."

Last year, IPEI allocated more than \$230,000 as Teacher Grants, Red and Gold Grants, and Community Collaboration Grants; for its two affiliate organizations; and as awards from its special funds. IPEI also enabled all 2,900 elementary school students to visit the eight Discovery Trail sites through the Kids Discover the Trail! program.

Thanks to funding from the Park Foundation, retired Caroline Elementary School teacher Janie Moon Clark was hired to analyze what IPEI could evaluate to determine the impact of IPEI grants. Then she worked with Tempesta to develop a new grant report form to gather the relevant data.

"Student engagement" was selected as a way to measure the impact of IPEI's grants after considerable consultation with teachers and other experts. Research has shown that

engaged students learn at higher levels, retain what they learn, have a profound grasp of what they learn and can transfer it to new contexts.

For this reason, programs and activities funded with IPEI grants were evaluated using five measurements of student engagement as reported by teachers: body language, verbal participation, physical participation, independence and excitement. Students were ranked on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the greatest level of engagement, both before and after the activity.

With 76% of the grant reports for the 2012-13 school year completed, the average "engagement score" for all ICSD students increased to approximately 4.5 following an IPEI-funded activity, while the score for students performing below grade level expectations rose to nearly 4.

"Hunches, praise, and anecdotal confirmation can be valuable pats-on-the-back for a job well done," remarked Clark, "but the new IPEI grant evaluation tool extends beyond casual affirmations."

"The value of the recently-instituted formal IPEI grant evaluation is that it is standardized, repeatable, and it sampled all constituents who received grants," she said. "As a result, the conclusions are more robust, and they offer stronger evidence of the ways in which IPEI grants have positively influenced student engagement."

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This Winter, Ithaca Child is pleased to offer you a wide selection of ideas for things to see and do. Spanning the season from Thanksgiving to just before Valentine's Day brings us from the first light snows of winter and bare leaves of late Fall to the depths of Winter in Central New York. Our writers are offering up a selection of topics with a look at a number of local topics and events to perspectives on the holiday season, to health topics, educational events, and interesting views from the world of science and dinosaurs. We take an in-depth look at the Primitive Pursuits program where young people can learn outdoor survival skills and much, much more. Shelter building, fire building, outdoor cooking and other exciting skills keep kids interested. Check our season-long calendar for lots of things to do and see.

We thank you for reading our paper and we wish you a happy Winter season. Sincerely, Jim Graney, Publisher



Green parenting – an eco-holiday

By Julie Landry Lavolette

When artist and environmentalist Harmony Jones sees metal scraps, odd cuts of wood, even plastic bottle caps, she doesn't see trash. She sees a creative opportunity for her and her daughter, Skyler, 9, to fashion found objects into ornaments for their Christmas "enviro-tree."

This holiday season, green-minded revelers are putting their creativity to use and turning recycled materials into cards, wrap and ornaments. Jones said she and Skyler have fun giving new life to items that others would toss in the garbage.

"We get inspired when we find something," she said. "I'll ask 'What do you think we could make?'"

Jones suggests gathering a hot glue gun, string, wire and some found goodies, and let your creativity go to work. A few ideas:

- Pick items by color and texture that convey a feeling or theme.
- Hang pieces of scrap metal from your

tree for a modern, urban look.

- Make a hole in plastic water bottle caps and string them together for a garland.
 - Glue or tie dried herbs together for all-natural ornaments with a wonderful aroma.
 - Hot-glue seashells together to make angels.
 - Glue pieces of broken ornaments on a CD or small piece of wood to make a mosaic.
- "It's so important for the environment to be able to reuse things," said Jones, co-director of InsideOut Art and Wellness. "And because you made it yourself, you're putting meaning into it."

Jane Gilbert keeps her holidays green by wrapping presents with her children's artwork.

"I can never buy wrapping paper. It seems like such a waste," she said. "I used to use the comics. Then I started using the kids' paintings, and it was such a hit."

Gilbert, a founder of Dream and Green, which helps schools go green, buys large rolls of craft paper for kids Lauren, 4, and Myles, 2. Their painted creations first go on the wall, then are rotated out monthly to a pile Gilbert saves for wrapping.

"Everyone who sees it, loves it, because it looks different and special," she said.

More green tips:

- Consider giving no-waste gifts, such as music or sports lessons.
- Give products made from recycled or organic content.
- Give potted plants, flowers or trees that the recipient can plant in the garden or yard.
- Wrap gifts in reusable cloth bags or make your own wrapping paper with old maps, posters or pages from a newspaper or magazine.
- Package small, themed gifts in a larger item – such as plates or tableware in placemats or a tablecloth or kitchen utensils in an apron or decorative dishtowel.
- If you are bringing a dish to a party, package it in a washable kitchen container or wrap it with a holiday towel.
- Use e-mail for your holiday greetings – share photos and save time, paper and postage.

Julie is a mom of two and freelance journalist with 18 years of experience.