

# Connecting Classrooms with Ithaca Public Education Initiative

by Michael Nocella | Posted: Friday, July 24, 2015 6:07 am

The Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI), thanks to its newest grant program, Connecting Classrooms Grants, is awarding more money—and impacting more classrooms—than it ever has before.

The Connecting Classrooms Grants program was launched in fall 2014, and IPEI is currently fielding applications for its second cycle through Oct. 15. Last year, five grants totaling \$34,950 were awarded to Ithaca City School District (ICSD) educators.

Included in those grants were “What’s our Role? Building Community and Understanding our Local Environment: South Hill and Beverly J. Martin Elementary Schools’ Ecosystem Investigation” and Enfield Elementary School’s “Citizen Scientist Action Project,” which was led by 10 teachers from four buildings and “Connecting all Students through Sustainable Agriculture.” The latter grant is led by Carlan Gray, Ithaca High School (IHS) Science, Scott Breigle, IHS Technology, and Karen Kiechle, IHS Special Education. It included developing a high tunnel (for growing plants) at Ithaca High that will support work-based learning necessary for the new CDOC (Career Development and Occupational Studies) graduation credential, a long-term science elective in Sustainable Agriculture, and a project-based curriculum for technology classes, weaving classrooms and teachers into their quest to build creative curriculums that will evolve alongside new teaching regiments.

IPEI Assistant to the Director Julie Langenbacher explained how the organization’s grant programming is continuing to grow, as Connecting Classrooms Grants joins existing programs, including Teacher Grants, Red and Gold Grants, and Fine Arts Booster Group Mini-Grants.

“In the past [knowing how many grants, and what type of grants were going to be awarded every year] was definitely something we could predict more,” she said, “but now that isn’t the case. Our grant programs were founded in 1996 in response to teachers’ needs. IPEI’s mission all along has been to connect the community with the classroom to enhance curriculum. Our teacher grants have grown to the point where they can be as high as \$1,500.

“What we’ve found in our almost 20 years,” Langenbacher continued, “is that other needs have arisen. So the Red and Gold grants started in 2004, which was again in response to teachers’ needs. They had pop up projects, or needs that feel outside the guidelines [for other grants]. There were some material needs, some pilot programs, things like that. So we started the Red and Gold grants to



IPEI Tunnel

address those needs. Those grants go up to \$500, and we award more of those grants than anything else.”

Connecting Classrooms Grants has allowed IPEI to award grants that address needs that their previous grants could simply not, Langenbacher added.

“In this past year,” she said, “in response to what we were hearing from teachers in the classroom, we developed our newest program, which is the Connecting Classrooms grants. These are grants that are designed for multiple classrooms, either within a school, or a couple schools, or even district-wide at a particular grade level. Allowing teachers to work together to develop curriculum that’s sustainable and long-lasting is our goal, so we introduced that program this year, and we’ve been overwhelmed by the amount of interest in it.”

IPEI initiated Connecting Classrooms Grants using funds it received from generous community members who donated to its Our Children \* Our Schools \* Our Future campaign, which was launching in 2011. The newest grant program aims to build on IPEI’s successful models for encouraging and supporting innovative teaching and deeper learning, IPEI Executive Director Christine Sanchirico said.

“Our intent,” she said, “is to be the catalyst for ICSD staff to seek and develop innovative collaborative partnerships between teachers within a school, across grade levels and or between schools. It’s about working together. This is really our guiding principle for [Connecting Classrooms Grants].”

That is the goal for all of IPEI’s grant programs, but the sheer monetary flexibility of the Connecting Classrooms Grants gives ICSD teachers a much larger scale for their proposals, added Langenbacher.

“We found there is the need for connecting classrooms,” she said, “but there still is a need for our other grants. For instance, our Red and Gold grant program—at least two of the grants from that program last year involved teachers across a grade level in a school where they use a \$500 grant to connect a curricular unit that all the students could use to have a common experience. So we’re seeing the need for that kind of collaborative work between teachers, but it might be at the \$500 level or it might be a \$1,500 level, or it might be at the Connecting Classrooms grant level.”

No matter the dollar amount of a grant, it is clear IPEI is continuing to play a huge role in improving the education experience of ICSD teachers and students. The organization could not continue to make that kind of impact, and progress, without the help of its community members. For those interested in contributing, or learning more about contributing, IPEI’s website ([www.ipei.org](http://www.ipei.org)) includes details on all of its grants, activities and opportunities. Langenbacher said IPEI is proud of how much it is able to complement the already strong curriculum in Ithaca.

“I think we have always been vital. I think we have seen in the past few years that what we’re

hearing from teachers is that the role we're playing now is giving them the resources to develop curriculum modules around the new Common Core standards, and other variables. For core curriculum our grants are not about the fluff – the field trips, the extracurriculars – but now, more than ever, we are supporting teachers who are trying to figure out how to teach things in a new way.”