

'Buddies' Are Brought Together by KDT

By Heather Zimar

This is the latest in a series of articles about Kids Discover the Trail! to mark its 10th anniversary.

Each spring, second-graders sit in pairs at tables at the Sciencenter. In front of them are wood bases, tape, popsicle sticks, styrofoam balls and string. The museum educator leads an experiment about wind power, challenging the students, who are paired with buddies from another elementary school, to design blades for a windmill that spins when placed in front of a fan.

Students work together, cutting paper shapes and taping them to the ends of popsicle sticks. They hurry with excitement, attaching sticks and blades of various shapes to their windmill. Once they are ready to test their designs, they step in front of the fan. "Yes!" exclaim the children proudly as they watch their turbines circle in the wind. "It worked!" shout others.

This experiment is just one example of the hands-on education students engage in every year through Kids Discover the Trail! Ithaca (KDT), a collaborative effort of the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI), the Discovery Trail (DT) and the Ithaca City School District (ICSD). This year marks the 10th anniversary of the program, which gives every district student the opportunity to visit a DT site each year during elementary school.

KDT Ithaca partners all 3,000 Ithaca students in more than 150 classrooms with another classroom at the same grade level for the trips and pre- and post-trip activities. Visits to DT sites connect two of the



Photo provided

Young students put their wind power creation to the test at the Sciencenter.

district's elementary schools (except in grade four because the Eight Square Schoolhouse can accommodate only one class at a time).

Students are paired with "buddies" from the other school, and they often meet each other before the visits through pre-trip activities or pen pal messages using email or Skype. Students may share bus rides to the sites, eat lunch together and participate in structured field trip activities and/or open-ended exploration together, depending on the plans made by the DT site and classroom teachers.

In addition, KDT encourages the linked classrooms to keep in touch during the rest of the school year through "Buddy Up" trips. Classes meet at local parks or visit another

DT site together. In 2014, these interactions happened in a variety of settings, such as trips to Taughannock Falls State Park, Bement-Billings Farmstead, Camp Comstock and the Alex Haley Pool. "KDT Ithaca's buddying of students is a significant part of what makes the program special," DT coordinator Nancy Grossman says. "Mutual experiences foster understanding among students. When they enter middle school there are more familiar faces. We know that, through KDT programs, students have made important connections that have led to long-lasting friendships."

"The KDT program epitomizes our unrelenting goals of community and learning here in Ithaca," says Ithaca High School Principal

Jason Trumble. "Kids connecting and learning together across elementary schools is a great introduction to the relationships they will develop in middle school. Our yearbooks are filled with pictures of students on the trail, and students readily recollect their experiences with one another. As a long-time secondary administrator, I continue to marvel at the deep impact KDT has had, and continues to have, on our youth, preparing them for middle/high school and beyond."

Many partnered teachers use the district-wide KDT planning meeting to pair their students, while others take different approaches. For example, some teachers developed student interest surveys and use the responses to pair buddies. Other teachers create and use their own "get to know you" activities to help facilitate in-person student interactions.

Teachers across all grade levels report that meeting and getting to know their buddies is an exciting opportunity for students. "Although there are many important impacts of KDT trips, the one that stands out the most is the friendships that are formed between the students in different schools before middle school starts," says Jennifer Emerson, a fourth-grade teacher at Fall Creek Elementary School. "I have had many students talk about how they kept in touch with their buddy through fifth grade and then had another friend in middle school."

According to its annual program evaluation, KDT's social component is effective. Of sixth-graders

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Old Library Site Proposals Approved for Further Review

The special legislative committee charged with reviewing expressions of interest to redevelop the site of the Old Tompkins County Library today recommended that all four sponsors of active concept proposals submitted to the County be invited to advance to the next stage of the process, response to a detailed Request for Proposals (RFP) issued by the county.

The prospective developers are DPI Consultants, Franklin Properties, MCK Building Associates, STREAM Collaborative, Taitem Engineering, and Dr. Marne O'Shae, MD; Rochester's Cornerstone Group, Ltd. and Cayuga Housing Development Corporation; and Travis Hyde Properties and HOLT Architects.

(Two others had also responded to the RFEI, but over the course of the review period withdrew from consideration.)

As part of the selection criteria stated in the document, the County expresses its interest "in selling or leasing the property at fair market value for redevelopment that will make a positive contribution to the community and that is not only compatible with, but also will strengthen and enhance the quality of the surrounding neighborhoods."

It requests that all proposals include mixed uses and that housing be designed to serve a diverse population and provide ownership opportunities, if possible. Green building pro-

posals that use highly energy-efficient building methods and renewable energy will be favored; and all project proponents will be required to attend a special meeting of the Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The final RFP would be released in December; responses due by March 2015; county review and selection of the preferred developer by July; coordinated SEQR review and certificate of appropriateness process before the Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission between July and October; legislature authorization of sale or lease by December 2015; and closure of the sale or lease by January 2016.

'Buddies'

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surveyed about their experiences with KDT, 94 percent said they remembered their buddies, and 77 percent said they had seen one or more of their buddies in middle school, IPEI president Jennifer Engel says. "That had positive impact. The outcome is a much calmer transition to middle school."

Parents, too, recognize the positive impact the social-interaction aspect of KDT has had on their child's school experiences. Asia Bonacci, a parent of two Fall Creek Elementary students, says her fifth-grade daughter has expressed excitement over the years about meeting a new friend and seeing the friend's school. "The KDT program is a great way to introduce area kids to all the wonders of living in and around Ithaca," Bonacci says. "The buddy system, in particular, broadens their tiny elementary school experience to include

other kids from all over the community—suddenly they become common citizens of a much larger world."

Justice

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learn more from our enemies than we learn from flattering friends. From a scientific perspective, we learn more from disconfirming evidence that upends our views than from corroborating evidence. So, like those judicial candidates, to get over self-righteousness we have to assemble the wisdom of divergent commitments.

This is the approach of my employer, Shared Journeys. We are dedicated to address stubborn, even seemingly intractable, differences. One example is how we assist with food relief as part of Ithaca MobilePack, which has packed 1,300,000 meals over five years for hungry children in Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Africa.

Food aid is controversial, particularly whether organizations

should provide immediate relief, which may impede longer-term solutions. Both approaches are necessary. Christine Olsen, a Cornell professor of nutritional sciences, and expert on the needs of women and children, observes that, "Good people of faith could come out in very different places in this discussion."

Shared Journeys is a catalyst for learning across differences locally, regionally and internationally. Locally, 1,500 packers volunteer in the most diverse event in Ithaca/Tompkins County. We bring together Muslims, Jews and Christians, as well as nonreligious folks, low-income, African-American, Asian and Latino participants, straight and gay, students—elementary through college—and rural and urban residents. We don't endorse each others' ways of life,

but we accept the fact that we need to work together to address issues that are bigger than any of us.

We become educated advocates for food security and the operation of food markets. Through this activity, we have mitigated prejudice toward Muslims, Jews, Evangelicals, Mormons, atheists and secularists, locally and globally. We continue to challenge an international aid organization to promote sustainable local food production within and near the 70 countries receiving aid.

With an eye on justice rather than self-righteousness, we learn to live in productive conflict. Only then will we be strong enough to engage and carry out the work that needs to be done.

Eric Clay is co-founder and community coach of Shared Journeys.

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