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FIRST HONORS

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Mentor Michael Meyer from the Louisville Water Co. works with Iroquois student Colton Craig.

Student-driven lessons

Iroquois, Fairdale students get grant to build amphitheater, athletic field on JCPS property

BY SHANNON CLINTON | CORRESPONDENT
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A project that Iroquois High School students selected to better utilize land near their school is close to becoming a reality, thanks to the students' hard work, their mentors and a \$25,000 grant from the Lowe's home improvement company.

Along with supervising adults, those involved include about 45 students who partici-

pate in local chapters of SkillsUSA, a nonprofit outreach program that prepares high school and college students for technical, skilled and service occupations, and another 15 or so students who participate in the ACE Mentor Program of Greater Louisville, a group focused on introducing high schoolers to careers in architecture, construction and engineering, said Iroquois High School engineering teacher Johnny Sewell.

"The kids that we have here at our school who are working on this project, they're learn-

ing true, real-life scenarios," he said. "... It's helping them see a broader scope of what the construction industry is all about, beginning to end."

In November, the ACE Mentor Program of Greater Louisville applied for a Lowe's SkillsUSA Schools in Need grant on behalf of SkillsUSA chapters at Iroquois High School and Fairdale High School. The chapters learned in January that they had received the grant.

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Students brainstormed uses for property to pursue as team project

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which is funded by the Lowe's Charitable and Educational Foundation.

According to the informational Web site for the Schools in Need grant, its goal is "to identify schools, classrooms or teachers who have a very basic need to improve the quality of their students' educational experience."

Applicants were asked to describe a need for classroom improvements, upgrading or providing tangible tools for learning technical skills, or fostering leadership development, according to the site, and grants of \$2,500 to \$25,000 were awarded.

Dwayne Rice is ACE Mentor board chairman for the local affiliate and a project manager with Turner Construction Co. in Louisville. He said the Lowe's grant is the largest to be successfully applied for locally by the program. Funds will be controlled by SkillsUSA at the local level, he added.

Students devised plan for former apartment property

Each year, ACE Mentor Program student teams pursue a project together. About 15 ACE Mentor participants at Iroquois High School learned that Jefferson County Public Schools had purchased apartment buildings near their school and began brainstorming uses for the property to pursue as a team project during the school year.

"It was the students' idea what to put in place of those buildings," Rice said.

The students believed the property, about two acres, would be ideal to accommodate an outdoor classroom/amphitheater near Iroquois High School and a multipurpose athletic field for nearby Frederick Law Olmsted Academy South, which did not have its own field.

They also determined that a rainwater reuse area could collect rainwater from the school building and parking lot to irrigate the school's athletic fields and minimize stormwater runoff into city sewer systems.

The students presented their ideas to the JCPS school board in spring 2012.

The Lowe's grant will be able to fund the first two projects, with the third placed on hold until more funding is secured.

Donated materials will supplement what will be purchased with the grant, and construction contractors who are involved with ACE and SkillsUSA will donate labor.

Mike Mulheirn is JCPS district facilities director and has been a mentor for the ACE Mentor Program for just over one year. He said the apartment buildings at the site were demolished last fall, but at the time district officials had no concrete plans for its use.

His staff now will assist students during site prep and continue working with students and contractors as the project progresses. The grant stipulates that the project must be completed by November.



PHOTO COURTESY | TIM THORNBERRY

From left, Iroquois students Kasim Alsaman, Cameron Mota and Regina Jerman work with mentor Steve Marshall of Jacobi, Toombs & Lanz Inc. engineering firm. In the background is Jason Theis, another mentor from Jacobi Toombs & Lanz.

"The value of the project obviously is more than just dollars," he said. "For students, it's a real-life exercise they can look back at" and view the results for years to come.

Students to work during school days

For the past two years, Daren Thompson has been ACE Mentor team leader at Iroquois High School and, with the aid of SkillsUSA representatives at both state and local levels, he helped write the grant application last fall.

Thompson also is flood protection supervisor for the Louisville-Jefferson County Metropolitan Sewer District.

The \$25,000 check from Lowe's was received in early March, he said, and these funds will go toward purchasing blocks that masonry students will use to build retaining walls for the amphitheater, as well as other supplies and equipment.

He also hopes local contractors will donate soil, personnel and use of equipment to help lower project costs.

Thompson said the grant would be enough to purchase the materials even if they do not donate.

"The labor is free since we are using the students," he said. "The construction companies' involvement speeds up the schedule to ensure that we get it complete before November and that students learn best practices from people that do this type of work every day."

Students worked with a professional surveyor late last year, before the holiday break, to help take measurements at the site. Construction was scheduled to begin this month.

ACE Mentor students and others studying skilled trades at Iroquois and Fairdale high schools will work at designated times during school days, using heavy equipment such as excavators and backhoes as work progresses.

Thompson said the dirt mound for the amphitheater will be finished by the first of June. Students and teachers will volunteer time during the summer to install blocks for the seating so that can be completed by the end of September. The goal is to complete the final site restoration in October.

Thompson hopes other funding sources will allow the rainwater storage area to be pursued in the next year or two.

Students excited by opportunity

Abdiel Perez, a 17-year-old junior at Iroquois and second-year ACE Mentor Program participant, plans to pursue a career in engineering, and he is happy to have already gained experience with the Lowe's grant project.

Early in the project, he helped calculate measurements of the property and the dimensions of the amphitheater.

"The most exciting part is the fact that before I graduate, I'm going to see it come to life, hopefully, and I guess I'm going to help build it. And that will be fun since I'm one of the people who helped design it," he said.

Regina German, a 17-year-old junior at Iroquois, has been in ACE Mentor Program for two years and said she hopes to pursue a career in engineering.

She helped with surveying and drawing up plans for the amphitheater project, and she is excited to be involved with a permanent feature on her high school's campus.

"When I get older and I drive past with my kids, I can say, 'I built this when I was in high school.'"

ACE MENTOR PROGRAM

The ACE Mentor Program of America Inc. has affiliates nationwide, including the ACE Mentor Program of Greater Louisville, and helps introduce students to needed skills and career opportunities in architecture, construction and engineering fields.

Teams of students at Iroquois, Jeffersontown, Fairdale and Trinity high schools meet weekly with professionals representing these industries to work together on a project throughout the school year.

The Louisville affiliate, which now has about 65 members among the four schools, was launched in September 2009.

For more information, visit www.acementor.org/696.

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Dr. Gary A. Ransdell
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Gary A. Ransdell