A project that Iroquois High School students selected to better utilize land near their school in 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 participate 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 learning 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.
Students brainstormed uses for property to pursue as team project

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 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 SkillUSA 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 SkillUSA 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.

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 cement trucks and school buses.

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

Abdul 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 part 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.’"