Park Foundation helps fund media literacy

IC, Ithaca school district hope to produce smart consumers

From Journal Staff Reports

ITHACA — A $150,000 grant from the Park Foundation will fund a 1-year-old project that promises to make local students smarter users of the media.

Project Look Sharp is sponsored by Ithaca College through the Center for Teacher Education, Center for Research on the Effects of Television and the Roy H. Park School of Communication and by the Ithaca City School District.

“The Park Foundation grant has given us a tremendous opportunity to increase our educational outreach and programming efforts,” said Cyndy Scheibe, the project director and associate professor of psychology at Ithaca College. “It will fund an assistant director and two student interns and help us establish a media literacy library for the college and school district.

The goals of the project are to make students good critics of media content and to develop their own media production skills. Media literacy is not being taught as a separate subject, Scheibe said, but as an integral part of subjects students are already learning. For example, Eric Miller, a fourth-grade teacher at Caroline Elementary School, is developing a social studies unit that looks at ways Native Americans are stereotyped in books, films, and stories. He’s developing materials that all fourth-grade teachers can use, Scheibe said.

Training for teachers in how to integrate media literacy skills into existing curricula is an important component of the project, Scheibe said. More than 100 Ithaca school district teachers have either attended workshops or had individual mentoring so far. In addition, Ithaca High School librarian Armin Heuer has collected more than 100 sources, books, videotapes, audio tapes and teacher guides, that will be available to teachers in the school district and at Ithaca College beginning in January.

The next steps on Project Look Sharp’s agenda will be tying media literacy to math and science classes and starting public address-system radio stations in several elementary schools, Scheibe said.

One math teacher is already teaching graphs and percentages by having her students keep records of how much time they spend using different types of media and then translating the material into pie and bar graphs. The radio stations will begin operating after students learn to write their own news programs to be broadcast over the schools’ public address systems. Production is an important part of media literacy, Scheibe said. Students will learn how easily a reporter can bias a story — by who is interviewed, the questions asked, the way the responses are edited.

A theme that runs through all Project Look Sharp’s programs is the influence of media on the political process, on power dynamics and social relations around the world, Scheibe said.

“The sheer volume and accessibility of available information demand that students at all grade levels be able to filter that information effectively and use media wisely — in other words, become media literate,” she said.