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Science Notes - Support Program for Instructional Competency in Astronomy

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SCIENCE NOTES

Support Program for Instructional Competency in Astronomy

Astronomy education lacks a unified, national support program. The nation's 1,200-1,600 high school astronomy teachers are generally isolated from their peers. As many as 7,000 other teachers would like to develop astronomy courses but cannot find suitable materials. Approximately 20 percent of a typical earth science course is astronomy, and studies show earth science teachers generally have weak astronomy backgrounds. Astronomy resources for elementary grades exist, but, as in earth science, teacher preparation is often insufficient. To remedy these problems a plan, called Project SPICA, has been developed by the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (CfA).

Project SPICA is a three-year program designed to develop a nation-wide teacher resource agent network funded by The National Science Foundation and local school districts. Dr. Irwin Shapiro, Director of the CfA is the principal investigator of the project and Philip Sadler is the project director.

Over a three-year period, Project SPICA will train a cadre of 100 master earth science teachers who, in turn, will lead local, area and regional workshops for teachers of all grade levels, K-12. SPICA agents may reach 10,000 other teachers and through them, perhaps a half million students.

The first summer workshop for Project SPICA was held in August at the Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of the CfA. During an intense three-week workshop, teachers from 17 states were acquainted with a large storehouse of astronomy education activities and resources by the Project SPICA staff and visiting experts and given instruction in effect workshop techniques. These teachers (and others to be trained in subsequent summers) will be available to conduct astronomy-education workshops for other teachers in their home areas, states and regions.

Iowa readers interested in conducting teacher workshops using the services of SPICA agents should contact D. Louis Finsand, Price Laboratory School, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-3593.

Project SPICA provides funds for materials, but does not provide travel funds or honoraria. Travel and honorarium fees are to be agreed upon between each SPICA agent and the agency conducting the workshop. It should also be noted that the agents are not supported to perform classroom visits.

For additional information about Project SPICA, contact Dr. Darrel Hoff, Associate Director, Project SPICA, Center for Astrophysics, 60 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138 or telephone at (617) 495-9798.

--D.H.