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Kid-To-Kid Communications Reap Surprising Rewards

New York, NY (Oct. 8, 2004) -- Children in the earthquake-rocked Iranian city of Bam are receiving a gift from some fourth- and fifth-graders in Seattle, Washington this fall: "comfort quilts" decorated with cheery pictures drawn by the Seattle kids.

The American students already are reaping surprising payoffs from their act of concern: knowledge they're making a real difference in the world through partnership with global peers. And, if they are anything like other youngsters who have undertaken similar projects, they will also experience dramatic improvements in their reading and writing skills.

The colorful quilts will go on display and then be given to children in the ancient city of Bam, much of which was destroyed in last December's magnitude 6.5 earthquake. The ground-shaking killed thousands and destroyed more than half of the buildings—many of them made of mud brick.

As soon as they heard about the catastrophe, students in two Seattle schools went to work on their project. Each child drew a crayon design, which was ironed onto a cloth patch and sewn into a quilt. They read websites about how other schools were making quilts, including schools in Uzbekistan.

As the Seattle students receive and respond to images and email about the arrival of the comfort quilts in Bam, Iran, this communication - on a topic they deeply care about - is expected to give their reading and writing skills a tremendous boost.

"Since they haven't been tested, it's too early to tell in the case of these students," says award-winning teacher Kristi Rennebohm Franz, who first organized quilt projects in her Pullman, Washington classroom and now shares them with other schools. "But I have seen learning accelerate beyond the traditional learning expectations, especially for primary age student literacy" through use of this kind of project.

Comfort Quilts Inspired by Hurricanes

Rennebohm Franz started using comfort quilt projects in 1998, when she had her class make a quilt for children affected by Hurricane Georges in Puerto Rico and Nicaragua. The Category 4 storm took 600 lives that September as it rampaged through the Caribbean, the Florida Keys and the U.S. Gulf Coast.

"We had been doing a science project that put us in touch with some students in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and we received an email from them just before the hurricane hit," says Rennebohm Franz. "Our students started trying to find out the effects of the hurricane. They followed the news about it, and while waiting for email to be restored, they decided to make a quilt. It was a pretty powerful example of how email and technology can provide communication in a short period of time, in a very difficult

situation.”

Since then, similar projects coordinated by Rennebohm Franz have included a comfort quilt made for children in Afghanistan and for children's hospitals in China and United States.

Most of the 1st –2nd grade class exceeded 3rd grade reading standards

During the 2001-2002 school year, Rennebohm Franz gave her Pullman primary students a reading test to assess how this project was helping them meet state reading standards. Instead of a book, the text she used was a final email message concerning the project. Otherwise, she strictly adhered to the school district's regular procedures for administering such tests.

“The composite class reading scores showed that 81 percent of the first and second graders exceeded the third grade standard for reading accuracy,” Rennebohm Franz says. “Fourteen percent met third grade reading level standard for accuracy, and 5 percent demonstrated positive evidence of working toward the third grade reading accuracy standard. No student failed to meet the standard at all.”

“We've always known that kids respond better to things they're interested in—just like adults,” says Dr. Edwin H. Gragert, executive director iEARN-USA, part of the International Education and Resource Network, which operates in 25,000 schools and 109 countries around the world. “These teaching methods are paying off in measurable ways.”

iEARN coordinates the quilt projects and many other similar undertakings throughout the world.

Getting kids to write to peers about things that concern them—and then to focus on a related project—is not a new idea. “Authentic learning,” the practice of allowing students to explore real-world problems and undertake projects that are relevant and interesting to them, is a much-discussed trend in educational theory. But as more teachers find out about the sometimes spectacular results in terms of improving test scores—especially when use of the Internet is involved—the methods are gaining popularity.

Four years in one in language mechanics

“One group of students gained an average of four years in one year on the language mechanics part of a standardized test,” says Pepperdine University Prof. Margaret Riel, who did some pioneering research in this field in the mid-1980s. “The whole class, which started below grade level, gained an average of two grade levels from working on these collaborative network projects. From these results, it appeared that engaging students in work they cared about was a very effective way to help students learn. We also found that this worked with students who previously had not done well in school. That was very exciting.”

Riel founded a program called Learning Circles, originally sponsored by AT&T, now by iEARN. The idea is to link students in as many as a dozen schools in the United States and abroad as they work on a collaborative project, such as exploring local environments, histories, geographies, customs, or living conditions.

Often, in addition to improving their test scores, Riel says participants are surprised by what they find out about kids in other states or distant lands.

“In one of the early Learning Circles, we had schools in Mexico, Japan,

California, and Alaska,” says Riel. “The kids in California wanted to write about the problems of illegal aliens causing crime in their neighborhood. They were quite angry about this. Well, the kids in Tijuana came back and said they wanted to talk about crime in their city caused by people all over Mexico coming there to cross the border. They had people sleeping on their streets and causing crime. Suddenly this became a shared problem of border cities, rather than an us-versus-them issue.”

Riel says all this improves language skills because the kids know that their words are actually being read and responded to by their peers—and not just by a teacher who will issue a grade.

Upper 1% on state writing exams in N.J.

Barry Kramer, who now heads the Learning Circles for iEARN, has seen the power of peers. For the past 15 years, his fourth graders in Quakertown, N.J. have scored in the upper 1 percent for writing in the annual state exams. Kramer credits the intense written interaction with other students for the test gains. “My students didn’t get these kind of scores before we started doing Learning Circles,” he said.

A Massachusetts high school teacher who has coordinated similar projects, Mary Ann Gormley, is impressed by how “ultimately the kids find out they have more in common than they have things that divide them.”

In one project, Gormley’s students wrote to students in other schools in the United States and the Middle East about values they felt were important in their lives. “It helped our kids understand that no matter what region you live in, as teenagers, you have the same problems. You kind of see the world the way it is, and are concerned about it, and want to make a better world.”

But in addition to fostering better international understanding, the big payoff from such programs is more efficient learning, as reflected by improved test scores.

“Parents see dramatic learning improvements for their children, and most importantly the children know it’s happening,” says Rennebohm Franz. “They not only have a vested interest in the topic they’re dealing with, but because as part of the curricula there is an ongoing assessment, the children can see for themselves how well they’re learning.”

Rennebohm Franz has been a Visiting Practitioner at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education. She is co-authoring a book on the subject: *Teaching for Understanding with Technology*, due out in December (Wiske, Rennebohm Franz & Breit, Jossey-Bass, 2004). Presently, she does teacher professional development in Seattle.

IEARN International Education and Resource Network

IEARN is the world’s largest K-12 project-based Internet-supported learning network. Piloted in 1988 with 12 schools in NY and 12 in Moscow, the network has grown to about 25,000 schools in 109 countries, with about 1 million participants engaging in more than 150 projects in 30 languages, which have been designed and facilitated by teachers and students to fit their curriculum needs. (www.iearn.org)

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