

Pen Pals

*LaMoure Public School
LaMoure, North Dakota*

A few hundred handwritten letters helped hone the writing skills of students at LaMoure Public School last year. The in-school Pen Pals program not only gave students the opportunity to correspond with their friends, but also to share the experience with their parents.

The school's Action Team for Partnership (ATP) adapted the letter writing program from the regular curriculum. For some years, teachers had been helping students write letters to one another as part of their Language Arts program. ATP members decided to involve parents in the project this year.

At the beginning of January, the principal assigned each student a pen pal from another classroom. "We try to keep the pen pals within one grade level of each other so they have some things in common," she explained. The assignment was simple: each student would write one letter each week to his or her pen pal during the month. Parents were to lend helping hands. ATP members created parent information packets that contained an instruction sheet on the parts of a letter, the dos and don'ts of letter etiquette, and sample letters.

Older students learned the intricacies of friendly letters—salutations, date and address styles, and the correct way to sign such a letter. Young students took a simpler approach, filling their letters with short sentences and plenty of pictures. Teachers checked to see that students were writing their letters.

The pen pals were divided into two groups. One group mailed its letters on Tuesdays in a mailbox made by high school shop students. The other group on Fridays. Sixth-graders delivered the letters. Twice a week, they donned letter carrier uniforms, donated by the local post office, and sorted and stamped the letters. They put the letters in their mailbags and delivered them to each classroom.

At the end of the month, administrators hosted a Pen Pals Picnic to celebrate the end of the project and let the pals meet. Students decided, in their letters, who would bring games, picnic blankets, or extra foodstuffs. The cafeteria staff prepared a special picnic lunch. Once the pen pal pairs filled their trays, they headed to the school gymnasium where they sat on blankets, played games, and ate with their new friends.

Teachers noticed significant improvement in writing skills. Parents gave Pen Pals high marks as well.

"It was fun helping them write letters," one parent said, while another commented, "How many of us do that anymore, with e-mailing and texting?"

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