

LETTERS: Project corresponds with other middle schools

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students even as far away as Germany, Romania, Turkey and China thanks to the 1:1 Chromebook (computer) initiative and Google Translate — which, with the click of a button, will translate a letter into one of dozens of languages.

“The concept of the ‘race’ is to see who receives the most letters back or from the farthest distance,” says Aylor, a language-arts teacher and leadership advisor at Sisters Middle School. “There is so much excitement when we receive a letter back — one year we even had a teacher create a rap with all of our classmates’ names included.”

This project not only hooks students on writing, but also opens up discussions in social studies, geography, research and investigation, and learning about their community.

Each student in Aylor’s class draws two states out of a hat. As a group they review different schools and their ratings on www.SchoolDigger.com. Students select two schools with sixth-grade classes from each state they have drawn.

“Reviewing the school ratings allows us to open up a larger conversation,” says Aylor. “We discuss what could be factors for a school having a rating of 5 versus a rating of 2. We talk about different impacts — private or public schools, socio-economic factors of an area, urban or rural location and more. It’s a unique way (to) discuss how outside influences can affect something like a school.”

The Great American Mail Race is one of the first projects students do in September in Aylor’s class. After

students select the schools to write, they hand-write letters to each school. Each five-paragraph letter is drafted in a similar format with an introduction to the race, details about themselves and Sisters, and includes a few questions of the recipient.

Aylor uses the first draft as a chance to review and assess students’ writing skills. Then it is Aylor’s personal race to have the 1:1 Chromebooks rolled out to the sixth-graders in order to type their final draft. The use of the Chromebooks allows students to write more than one letter without starting completely over using pencil and paper.

In each letter, students are also required to include pictures — one of the school or mascot, the terrain around Sisters, what Sisters is known for and a “selfie.”

“The pictures help us have a larger discussion about our community,” says Aylor. “Often times the rich discussion help students new to our area learn what life (in) Sisters is all about throughout the entire year. We can answer questions like ‘What’s so big about a quilt?’”

Each letter is enclosed with a letter from Aylor to the corresponding teacher talking about the project, how to respond to the student’s letter and how their class can get involved in the Race.



PHOTO BY ERIN BORLA

Charles Irlam, sixth grade, displays a letter he received from a middle school in New Hampshire.

The student is charged with addressing the envelope.

“It’s shocking to me how many students don’t know how to address an envelope,” Aylor says. “We talk about letter-writing etiquette and the proper way to address an envelope. We talk about writing to others — like grandparents — and what it means to receive a letter.”

Letters are starting to come back. Aylor allows each student to read their own letter and decide if they would like to share it with the class; many choose to do so.

“I loved the excitement of the chance of getting something back,” says Pearl Gregg, a seventh-grader who participated in the project last year. “I never got any response from my letters — and that was a letdown. But I really liked hearing other

students’ letters.”

“Some students get envelopes containing letters from every student in the responding class,” Aylor says.

According to her letter that she includes to teachers at the other schools, the students’ enthusiasm is contagious. It is hoped that the Great American Mail Race will unite the sixth-graders of America to provide a lesson that will stay with them forever.

Students may even gain a pen pal out of the project. If they want to continue to write to the other students she gives them the opportunity to do so from home with parent permission.

Aylor is always looking for community connections to middle schools in other states to increase the chance of participation.

Sisters snapshots

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

News clips of happenings from around town

• Christmas season in Sisters starts this weekend with the community tree lighting on Friday, November 27 at 5:30 p.m. at Fir Street Park. The next day at 2 p.m. is the annual Christmas parade, this year moving from Hood to Main Avenue.

After the parade, meet the Clauses at the Chamber of Commerce office.

• City Council approved, with a 3-2 vote, an amendment to the ordinance regulating transient merchants doing business in Sisters. The major point of contention regarding not allowing transient merchants at any time on Cascade Avenue was approved.

• In another 3-2 vote, Council approved having no other commercial public events in town during citywide events — Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show, Sisters Folk Festival, and Harvest Faire.

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