

LEARNING PARTNERS LINKS SCHOOLS IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE US

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Townsend, Massachusettes: Before this semester, nine year-old Sloane, a student in Townsend, Massachusetts, did not know where Afghanistan was. After writing to a pen-pal in a remote Afghan village and studying Afghanistan in her own school, she is now familiar with the burka, with early marriage, and with many of the other pressures that face Afghan girls.

Sloane is one of 20 schoolchildren from Squannacook Elementary School who have reached out to peers in Afghanistan through a project known as the Learning Partners Peace Education Exchange.

The exchange has linked Squannacook up with two schools in Wardak province and allowed Sloane and the others to experience what Fred Goldberg, their teacher, describes as “authentic learning.” By this he means that learning activities should be connected to real world experiences in order to give the students the sense that their education is meaningful.

An example of this kind of learning is connecting students to real people in countries like Afghanistan in a way that opens their eyes to different cultures and enhances their educational experience.

“Authentic learning is all about building relationships and empowering students,” Goldberg explained. “It’s the only way to get students truly involved in their education.”

The Learning Partners project was presented last week at a “Night of Peace” in the Squannacook cafeteria, when the students introduced over 100 parents and guests to their work on Afghanistan. The highlight came when the students received letters and photos from their pen-pals in the two Afghan schools, Noor Khel and Godah.

Many of the photos captured intimate scenes, inside homes, of a kind that are rarely seen by foreigners. They were taken with disposable cameras that were carried to Afghanistan and given to the Afghan students with the request that they captured their world through their eyes, another aspect that makes the exchange “authentic.”

The entire community entered into the spirit of the Night of Peace by cooking Afghan dishes, tracking down traditional Afghan clothing and jewelry, and playing Afghan music. The event even attracted donors and diplomats. Awista Ayub, from the Afghan Embassy in Washington, described it as “a wonderful example of the positive bridge of energy between students thousands of miles apart.”

Sloane and Kyle, both nine, emceed last Thursday’s event, introducing speakers and inviting their classmates to recite extracts from their peace poems. For Sloane, “peace is a towering wave

/ covering the round world / Not a tsunami / just love.” Another student captured the elusive nature of peace: “Peace is a hot camel with a sunburn / That’s stumbling across the desert.”

Writing is an important part of the curriculum at Squannacook, and Goldberg’s students went as far as to make an anthology of their writing on Afghanistan, which they gave out at the Night of Peace. Several parents said later that their children had surprised them by working long hours outside of school, and exhibiting an unexpected level of knowledge about Afghanistan.

“What you have done is give them the tools to reach out and teach more and more people how to be compassionate and how to look beyond their four walls and hopefully change the world, little by little,” wrote one mother. “I want to thank you for opening up my son’s mind and more importantly his heart.”

The Noor Khel and Godah schools are supported by the Omid Learning Center, a small Afghan organization that was started by a former Afghan refugee, Sadiqa Basiri. Ms. Basiri, who is currently studying at Mt. Holyoke College, Massachusetts, was the guest of honor at last Thursday’s Night of Peace. Her presence added to the authenticity of the occasion.

The exchange between the Squannacook and Afghan schools was initiated by The Advocacy Project (AP), which supports Omid’s work. The LOFT Foundation—a group of educational consultants of which Mr. Goldberg is a founder—advised on the project.

Earlier this year, AP offered to deliver letters from Squannacook and bring back letters from Afghan pen-pals. Goldberg, a long-time teacher at Squannacook, and his students enthusiastically accepted the offer.

“We had no idea it would all come together so well,” said Goldberg, who hopes to expand the program to more schools next year. “This is bigger than us.”

The Learning Partners and Omid are now looking to produce lasting benefits for the students in both countries, and Goldberg hopes to meet his counterpart from Noor Khel, Mohamed Zahir next year. In his letter to Goldberg, Zahir writes: “I am happy to be a student to learn and I am happy to be a teacher to teach. I’ll be proud to do my duty as a patriot to my country’s children and to help them overcome the dark and see the brightness.”

Back in Townsend, Bryan, 10, is already seeing the light. He wrote in the class anthology: “I think that this is the most important thing that I have done in the ten years that I have lived.”