

Pen Pal Service Learning Project

Lewis Palmer Middle School
Monument, CO



COLORADO
Department of Education

In our current society, technology is often the most used form of communication. Many young students have never written or received a personal letter, and may be unsure of how to do so to communicate with their communities. At Lewis Palmer Middle School, this is one of the motivations of the Pen Pal Service Learning Project.

In this project, 7th grade students are paired with pen pals in the community, often senior citizens. Parents give permission for students to participate, and students are paired at the beginning of the school year. Time usually used for study hall is dedicated to this project instead, with students learning about writing, proofing, editing, and reciprocal communication skills. Letters are exchanged throughout the school year, and the school hosts a reception at the end of the year in order for pen pals to meet in person.

There are many goals addressed by this project, both for the students individually and for the larger community. Students are connected to the community, are able to reach out to people using a different mode of communication, and able to work through the discomfort of forming a relationship with someone they do not know. For community members, they are able to form a relationship with the school system, and to create a connection with a middle school student who they may see as difficult to reach. Additionally, the community member may become a mentor to the students. Many aspects of family-school-community partnering are supported by this initiative, including: creating a welcoming climate, developing personal relationships, facilitating connections among families, and connecting the school with community resources.

Throughout the year, teachers debrief on the process and identify what is going well and where improvements may be warranted. Students and community members are also able to offer their feedback on the project, and this information is shared with school administration.

The pen pal project has received wonderful feedback – over 90% positive. Students report that this type of communication helps them to develop relationships different than others that they have. The community members feel more connected to the school system, and often become part of the students' and their families' lives. Students also report that they learn to be more open in meeting people who they may not think they have anything in common with, which can translate to being more accepting to their classmates.