



**2011-12 Teachers Guide
The Classroom Connection
Letter Writing Exchange Program
for Grades 2, 3, 4, 5**



THE CLASSROOM CONNECTION: An Overview

Some say letter writing is a lost art, but the exchange of letters can build bridges across cultures, expand personal horizons, and bring people together in mutual understanding and purpose. For many of us, our first letter writing experience occurred in elementary school. We may even have fond memories of exchanging letters with a Pen Pal.

What is The Classroom Connection?

The Classroom Connection is a simple, yet powerful letter writing program for students in grades 2-5, using the existing language arts letter writing curriculum as a way for students to make important connections. Students from different socio-economic and geographic areas become Pen Pals, and use a structured writing exchange to get to know one another. Exposing students to the world beyond their neighborhoods, they come away with an appreciation of their current circumstances, an increased awareness of diverse cultures and lifestyles, and an ability to imagine greater possibilities for their lives.

How it Works

Classes of students are matched in a structured writing exchange. They write on three topics: **About Me** (school, family, hobbies, pets, favorites, etc.); **Places** (where I live, where I like to go, dream vacations, other places I've been or lived before, what's around me); and **Dreams** (what I want to be, where I want to live, how I would make the world a better place).

Teachers use a program guide and timeline to coordinate the exchange of letter packets between their partner classes. Students are matched one-to-one with a Pen Pal in the same grade. When letters arrive, each student reads their letter aloud so that everyone may "meet" the other students and learn about their lives.

What's Possible

Imagine living in a place filled with people who appreciate their communities, who understand and value the diversity of cultures, and who feel connected to those whose lives are different from their own. The Classroom Connection, a simple yet powerful letter exchange, can be the catalyst for lasting change. Fear dissolves. Kindness spreads. Understanding abounds. That's what's possible.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is The Classroom Connection Program?

A: The Classroom Connection Program is a classroom writing exchange designed to help students (grades 2 – 5) connect to one another as they learn about the range of cultures, geographies and people outside of their neighborhoods. Acknowledging the diversity of students in New Jersey and the unique characteristics of life in each of its 566 municipalities and 21 counties, The Classroom Connection uses letter writing and a pen-pal approach to help students to connect to each other, to the world around them and to their own hopes and dreams.

Q: What are the goals of The Classroom Connection Program?

A:

- To encourage students to write and develop their literacy and communication skills.
- To introduce students from different schools and towns around New Jersey to each other.
- To help students learn about what makes different towns and schools unique and special.
- To help students develop greater perspective and appreciation for where they live and what they have.

Q: How will classrooms be matched?

A: Teachers will register on their class on The Classroom Connection website, completing a form that provides basic demographic information. Our matching system will match classes by grade, and diverse demographics (geographic, cultural, and/or socio-economic). Teachers will receive their match confirmation by email along with instructions for the writing project.

Q: How will the letter writing work?

A: There will be at least three rounds of letters that will be sent between classrooms. Teachers integrate the letter writing process into their planned language arts curriculum.

Q: What will students write about?

A: There are three primary topics students will be writing about:

- **About Me** (school, family, friends, hobbies, pets, favorites)
- **Places** (where I live, what makes my town special, favorite places, dream vacations, places I've been or lived before)
- **Dreams** (what I want to be, where I want to live, how I would make the world a better place)

Q: What is the timeframe for the program?

A: To make the most of the connection between students and to provide enough time given competing classroom demands, enrollment begins in September and ends before the close of the school year.

Rolling Online Enrollment

September 1, 2011 to October 31, 2011

Matches sent to partner Teachers

By November 15, 2010

Writing begins as soon as partner teachers have connected and continues through the school year in a time frame that works for both teachers.

Complete Writing Exchange

Approximately May 31, 2012

Q: How do the letters move between classrooms?

A: Teacher of Class A begins the exchange. Once the letters in Round 1 have been written, they are collected, reviewed for general appropriateness, and then mailed in one large envelope addressed to teacher of Class B, who will then match the students to a pen pal from Class A, have them write their Round 1 letters in response, and mail them back in the same manner.

Q: What do we do if the numbers of students do not match?

A: In cases where class sizes differ by a few students, please assign enthusiastic writers more than one pen pal. This is REALLY important because we want no child left without a pen pal.

Q: Can we go beyond these three letters?

A: Yes, you can opt to complete this project after the three rounds, or continue with other topics. We suggest these additional topics: "Challenges" and "Looking Forward".

Q: Are there other topics we can use instead?

A: As long as both partner teachers agree, you may select topics of your choice or any of those listed below.

- Special happening at school
- Celebration of special occasions
- Student-authored poetry exchange
- My favorite book
- What I'm learning about New Jersey this year in class
- What I'm learning about in other subjects this year

Q: How can I make this into a more interactive class project?

A: A few ideas other teachers have suggested are:

- Using SKYPE so the students may meet by video
- Arrange a meet up class trip (if you plan this we'd love to be invited!)
- Sending photos and drawing along with letters
- Having one class start a story and the other add to it, send it back and continue the story in a number of rounds

Q: How can we incorporate technology into the process?

A: The basic project ensures that no class is excluded due to technology, but if both teachers feel that technology will work between the matched classes, you are welcome to use technology vs. handwritten correspondence.

Q: What if the other teacher is slow to respond, or does not respond at all?

A: This is the most frustrating part of the program for us. **Please remember that students are waiting for your letters on the other end of the connection.** We understand that challenges in the classroom may slow down responses, and things come up, however we ask that both teachers do their best to respond to each other in a timely fashion. We will provide both email and phone contact information when you get your match-- you are responsible to communicate with your partner. If timing permits, we may be able to help resolve the issue or find you a new match, but we can't promise this. Consider carefully your ability to carry the program out before registering. Thanks!

Q: What do you do if you've begun the process and you are not able to continue or complete the program?

A: Life happens and we understand this as adults; but because the students are expecting letters, it's important that you notify your partner teacher promptly so that he/she may inform the students and have an opportunity to process the information. Please also notify Celebrate NJ.

CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONS

Please refer to the welcome email you received indicating whether you are Class A or B. All letters may be handwritten (preferred) or word processed, and should be approximately 1-2 page(s) in length. Each letter should be signed with the student's first name and last initial.

Round One: Class A

Each student will write a letter on the topic "About Me" (school, family, hobbies, pets, favorites). The Teacher of Class A will collect all letters, review them for general appropriateness, and mail in one large envelope addressed to the Teacher of Class B.

Round One: Class B

Upon receiving the envelope from Class A, the Teacher of Class B will distribute one letter to each student to read. (This may be done randomly or selectively based on gender or similar interests.) Students read the letters aloud to the entire class so that all students in Class B "meet" all of the students in Class A. **(NOTE: In cases where class sizes differ by a few students, please assign enthusiastic writers more than one pen pal. This is IMPORTANT so that no child is left out.)**

Students from Class B respond to one (or two- see NOTE above) student letter from Class A on the topic "About Me". The letter should be addressed directly to the name (first name, last initial) of the student from Class A and writing should relate to similarities, differences, etc. expressed in the letter they received. Letters should be signed with student's first name and last initial. These students will now be "pen pals" for the duration of the project. The Teacher of Class B will collect letters, review for general appropriateness, and mail in one large envelope addressed to the Teacher of Class A.

Round Two: Class A

Upon receiving the envelope from Class B, the Teacher of Class A will distribute letters as addressed to each student to read. Students read the letters aloud to the entire class so that all students in Class B "meet" all of the students in Class A.

Students from Class A respond to their "pen pal" letter from Class B on the topic "Places" (where I live, favorite NJ places, dream vacations, other places I've been or lived). The letter should be addressed directly to their "pen pal". Letters should be signed with student's first name and last initial. The Teacher from Class A will collect all letters, review for general appropriateness, and mail in one large envelope addressed to the Teacher of Class B.

Round Two: Class B

Upon receiving the envelope from Class A, the Teacher of Class B will distribute letters as addressed to each student to read. Students read the letters aloud to the entire class so that all students in Class B learn about the places important to all of the students in Class A.

Students from Class B respond to their “pen pal” letter from Class A on the topic “Places” (where I live and what it’s like, favorite NJ places, dream vacations, other places I’ve been or lived). The Teacher from Class B will all collect letters, review for general appropriateness, and mail in one large envelope addressed to the teacher of Class A.

Round Three: Class A

Upon receiving the envelope from Class B, the Teacher of Class A will distribute letters as addressed to each student to read. Students read the letters aloud to the entire class so that all students in Class B learn about the places important to all of the students in Class B.

Students from Class A respond to their “pen pal” letter from Class A on the topic “Dreams” (what I want to be, where I want to live, how I would make the world a better place). Teacher will collect all letters, review for general appropriateness, and mail in one large envelope addressed to the Teacher of Class A.

Round Three: Class B

Upon receiving the envelope from Class A, teacher of Class B will distribute letters as addressed to each student to read. Students read the letters aloud to the entire class so that all students in Class B learn about the dreams of the students in Class A.

Students from Class B respond to their “pen pal” letter from Class A on the topic “Dreams” (what I want to be, where I want to live, how I would make the world a better place). The Teacher from Class B will collect all letters, review for general appropriateness, and mail in one large envelope addressed to the Teacher of Class A.

Round Three: Class A

Upon receiving letters from Class B, Teacher of Class A distributes letters to students who read to entire class so that all students in Class A learn about the dreams of all of the students in Class B.

Completion: Teachers may opt to complete the project at this point or continue.

Questions: Contact Karen Hatcher at Celebrate NJ! at 732.333.0462 or khatcher@celebratenj.org for additional information.