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With postcards instead of passports, an Evans elementary teacher shows students the world

Dos Rios 5th graders ask for field trips in the U.S. and internationally



Dos Rios Elementary School Braeden Reilly, left, hands a postcard from Romania to her fifth-grade student Lyli Bocanegra, right, on Friday, March 12, 2021 at the Evans school. Reilly solicited the postcards, addressed to her students, from friends and others around the world in order to help foster an international perspective in her students in addition to teaching about geography and writing. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)



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Thinking about inquisitive fifth graders who wanted to learn about a world closed to them by COVID-19 last year, a young Dos Rios Elementary School teacher considered ways to expand her students' access to the globe.

Instead of passports, Braeden Reilly has issued postcards to her 10- and 11-year-olds to temporarily satisfy their yearning to take field trips to places such as Ireland, the Bahamas and Miami. First-semester study of a United Arab Emirates skyscraper opened a door of curiosity for the kids, whose sights stretch higher than the 2,800-foot Burj Khalifa in downtown Dubai.

While international travel is beyond the students' current vision, Reilly instead brought the world to the Evans International Baccalaureate school.

"It's important for me to have kids know and understand where they live in the world," said Reilly, a 24-year-old who lived in three states through high school and graduated from CU Boulder. "For them to look at a map of the U.S. and know the world is a big place and it's a small place."



Braeden Reilly grabs a postcard off a board in her classroom at Dos Rios Elementary School on Friday, March 12, 2021 in Evans. Reilly solicited the postcards, addressed to her students, from friends and others around the world in order to help foster an international perspective in her students in addition to teaching about geography and writing. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)



This week, Reilly showed her students a more intimate side of the world through a surprise project called Postcard Pals. Initiated during winter break, Reilly contacted friends living abroad, as well as strangers on social media. The enthusiastic response yielded 71 postcards from 28 countries and seven states.

Reilly started out on her at-home journey across the world with a simple objective: to receive 19 postcards, one for each student in her class, with personalized messages including information about an international location such as a famous landmark or a favorite food.

After dropping hints over the past few weeks about the project, Reilly presented the postcards to the students on Friday morning. She said they were curious why postcards were taped to a board in their classroom, and they were thrilled and excited when they realized the postcards were for them.

Postcards were received from countries including: Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

The postcard locations were to be incorporated into Friday's classwork, and they'll be worked into future curriculum. The international day on Friday, the last day before spring break March 15-19, was scheduled to end with the students trying snacks and foods from different countries.

"I love her passion for the kids and learning, and trying to make the learning real for the kids," Dos Rios principal Matt Thompson said. "I think that's what Postcard Pals does. It's generally interested in our kids and their opportunity for learning, and it's nice to see her efforts are paying off."





Dos Rios fifth grader Lyli Bocanegra, bottom right, reads a postcard she received during class with teacher Braeden Reilly on Friday, March 12, 2021 in Evans. Reilly solicited the postcards, addressed to her students, from friends and others around the world in order to help foster an international perspective in her students in addition to teaching about geography and writing. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)

Dos Rios is a fully authorized International Baccalaureate World School offering a primary years program for students from ages 3 to 12. IB World Schools share a common philosophy in a commitment to high quality, challenging and international education, according to the Dos Rios website. There are four academic programs for IB schools designed for different age levels up to 19.

At Dos Rios, all students have the opportunity to take Spanish. The exposure to the language helps students learning other languages in the future and with cultural awareness.

Though Reilly's Postcard Pals project might appear novel and offbeat to an observer, Thompson said, the idea plays perfectly with the school's mission.

"We build a foundation in critical thinking and working with others and trying to get a deeper understanding of other cultures," Thompson added.

The postcards returned to Evans have included information about kangaroos and Flinders Street railway station in Melbourne, Australia, and the beauty of Paris and Nepal. An assurance to a student determined to travel to the Arabian Peninsula arrived with a postcard written by one of Reilly's college friends.

"Dubai is waiting for you," Kevin wrote.



People Reilly has never met were equally as kind and gracious with their replies and willingness to help a teacher trying to help her students. A woman named Erica working at a hotel resort in the Bahamas immediately responded after Reilly reached out because one of her students “wants to go to the Bahamas more than anything.”



Postcards for Dos Rios Elementary School fifth graders sit on a desk in teacher Braeden Reilly’s classroom on Friday, March 12, 2021 in Evans. Reilly solicited the postcards, addressed to her students, from friends and others around the world in order to help foster an international perspective in her students in addition to teaching about geography and writing. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)

Reilly, who’s visited 41 states and 13 foreign countries, didn’t have a contact in the Bahamas.

Reilly made contacts with others through a Facebook group for people who enjoy traveling internationally. A colleague put Reilly in contact with a retired educator from Boulder named Joe, who’s traveled the world with his wife. Joe wrote a letter to each of Reilly’s students, and he sent multiple postcards including one from Nepal.

“It is people like Erica and Joe as well as many others who have helped give my students a piece of this world,” Reilly wrote in an email. “The kindness of strangers. Do you need more? There are good people in the world.”



The Postcards Pals project won't end with one feel-good day for Reilly and her students. Lessons in geography, social studies and language arts based on the countries represented in the postcards. Reilly said the students will do their own research projects on a country from the postcards, which will also be true to their status as IB students in developing an understanding and familiarity with new people and places.

Geography is important to Reilly as a teacher, and she'll use the postcards to help the students learn more about the U.S. and the world. The postcards will also ultimately help the students refine their writing skills by responding with postcards and letters to their new "Postcard Pals."

"These people took the time to write, there's no way we're not taking the time to write back," Reilly said. "It doesn't compute with me. It means so much to me all these people sent postcards. It blows my mind."

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