

World Culture Connections

Students Learn About Culture at Home and Abroad

Sixth grade English and history teacher Brad Kirsch sits at his desk talking about how his class learns about the rest of the world. One way is obvious when you look over his shoulder. A map of the world covers the entire wall behind him.

What's not as visible is the year-long journey his students are on to understand their own culture and what it's like to live in other parts of the planet. They start with their own school—its landscape, recreation options, technology, art and languages—to understand what Brad calls “cultural universals.” Then they apply this focus to their own homes, creating a PowerPoint to show each of these facets of life, as well as their dietary habits (what and where do they eat), social organization (are they part of a nuclear family or an extended clan), economics (what do they do to earn and spend money) and religion (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, none).

“The whole point of studying world cultures in sixth grade is to discover the differences,” Brad says, “and that can start at home.”

Learning about themselves and their family's culture parallels their study of

other national cultures, focusing on India, Japan and China. For example, Brad's class discusses China's one-child policy and how industrialization has increased pollution in its cities. “China's immense population and increasing wealth also makes it desirable to build up instead of out,” says Brad. “In their new Sky City, they have designed a 200-story building that will have everything you need to live in one structure.”

Along with seeing the big picture of another culture, all 33 sixth graders get a more personal connection—a pen pal. Each of them has written a page about themselves—their family and pets, likes and dislikes, hobbies and friends—and included a photo. The documents were emailed to the Zhuhai International School, located in southeast China on an island across the bay from Hong Kong. Thirty-three students at Zhuhai are writing back about their lives (nationality, favorite classes, athletics, etc.), and the plan is to keep sending letters back and forth all year.

“In the spring, I'd like to have the kids Skype with each other,” says Brad. “We'll have to do it during an overnight at Saint George's so it can be during their school day in China.”

These personal contacts help students realize that they are part of a global community. Middle school is all about broadening horizons and making connections beyond their families and school. Sixth grade in particular is full of new experiences for kids at Saint George's—lockers, a rotating schedule, different classes and teachers.

“In World Cultures, I want to continue that trend of new things,” says Brad. “It is about exposing them to new concepts, ideas, and ways of doing things that occur outside the walls of our school or the boundaries of Spokane. I'm introducing them to something that expands their world.”

— John Carter, SGS Communications



**Above: Zhuhai International School & its soccer practice
Below: 6th graders with letters to pen pals at Zhuhai
Opposite: The rest of 6th grade with their letters**



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**→ Brad Kirsch,
History Teacher**

