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Network Sponsors Worldwide Sharing of Curricula

Thousands of schools in more than 100 countries are tapping into iEARN.

By Sean Cavanagh

Rarely a week goes by without students at Tehran's Saba School finding a new way to astonish their adolescent counterparts in the United States. First, the Americans discovered that the Iranian students wear long scarves to school, in keeping with Islamic tradition requiring modest female dress. A short time later, they learned that it often snows in the Middle Eastern city, enough to force the cancellation of classes at least one day so far this winter.



Then, more recently, the students at Orca Elementary School in Seattle received an unexpected mail delivery with a Tehran return address.

"They sent us Christmas cards," said an admiring Katherine Law, a teacher at Orca Elementary, who helped coordinate dialogue between her school and the Iranian students—and acknowledged her caution in not wanting to offend the Muslim students. "I wouldn't dare send them a Christmas card."



With Franklin Khantechit looking over her shoulder, Daniella Baldwin fans out postcards that she and her classmates at Orca Elementary School in Seattle are selecting to send to their counterparts in Iran.

—Dan Lamont for Education Week

The appreciative gesture, and many others, came to Orca Elementary as part of the International Education and Resource Network, or iEARN, a worldwide program that allows teachers and students to work collaboratively on classroom projects and share basic cultural information through the Internet and other technologies. The nonprofit global network serves 20,000 schools and youth organizations in 115 countries, including 600 schools in the United States. An estimated 1 million students, ages 5 to 19, take part every day.

Teachers and students design all the projects, and with the administrative help of iEARN officials, communicate with peers in other countries. Participants channel their work through Internet forums, e-mail, and other services on the organization's Web site (www.iearn.org), though they also communicate in other ways, as is the case with Orca Elementary and Saba School.

In addition, iEARN provides training for teachers, both online and at workshops and conferences, on such topics as basic computer skills and on integrating extended projects within social studies, science, math, reading, and other subjects. Other than a \$400 annual fee, schools need only a basic Internet connection or e-mail to join in. Solo teachers pay \$100 per year to use the service, though fees vary by country. Program officials say iEARN's use of basic technology is crucial to allowing students and teachers in poor and developing nations to take part.

Springboard to Dialogue

The Seattle-to-Tehran collaboration came about when Ms. Law met Masumeh Noorbakhsh, a teacher at the Saba School, at an iEARN-sponsored conference in Slovakia in 2004. Last fall, the two teachers worked together on the Teddy Bear Project, an iEARN undertaking for youngsters in the early grades. Pupils in

different countries send each other stuffed animals as “ambassadors.” The children then exchange diary entries and other messages by e-mail, describing the animals’ experiences in the visiting country.

The Iranian students correspond with their foreign counterparts in English. But iEARN also offers projects in 30 languages, including Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Farsi (the dominant language in Iran), Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. IEARN’s Web site gives descriptions of each project, the targeted ages for participation, the teacher or organization facilitating it, the languages in which it is offered; and password-protected links to Internet forums and other resources.

Schools often use the iEARN connections as a springboard to more open-ended conversations. Students in Tehran and Seattle, for instance, share information about many aspects of their schools and societies, by e-mail and regular mail—the Christmas cards being one such exchange.

Students at Saba School, a public institution located in the northeastern section of Tehran, have participated in several iEARN projects over the years. Those partnerships have given the Iranian students more familiarity with computers and the Internet, as well as insight into a different society, said Ms. Noorbakhsh.

“It [invites] students to share their opinions, experiences, feelings, and thoughts with other students in the whole world,” said Ms. Noorbakhsh in an e-mail from Tehran.

IEARN was founded in 1988 by the Copen Family Foundation, in New York, which gave financial backing to a partnership linking a dozen schools in both Moscow and New York City through technology. Supporters of that venture concluded that it improved students’ foreign-language skills, encouraged them to read more at home, and increased their overall understanding of foreign cultures. The program steadily grew throughout the 1990s to include more countries, which opened centers to train and assist teachers.

Today, iEARN is overseen by an assembly of representatives from participating countries. Its funding sources vary by country, though central governments contribute to many of those programs, said Lisa Jobson, the assistant director the U.S. iEARN office. The U.S. branch, which is headquartered in New York and employs 14 staff members full time, has an annual budget of about \$3.1 million and receives money from the departments of State and Education, in addition to philanthropies and private contributions, she said.

International Scrapbook

IEARN’S projects vary greatly in scope. Some focus on topics that are specific to a region, such as Ecology of a Coral Reef, while others cover issues of importance to school communities worldwide, such as bullying. Still others focus on broader goals, such as The Bridge Project, which attempts to build understanding between U.S. students and teachers and those in predominantly Muslim nations.

Projects draw anywhere from five to 50 participating schools worldwide, Ms. Jobson said. Teachers are free to join and exit projects when it suits their needs. Some schools have found ways to grade students’ projects on the basis of their writing, communications, and other skills. IEARN officials are seeking to track those efforts, so that other teachers around the world can learn from them, Ms. Jobson said.

Nancy Kaplan, a world-literature teacher at the College of Staten Island High School for International Studies, in New York City, used the program to create an “international teen scrapbook” for her students and those from other countries. IEARN officials set up an online forum for Ms. Kaplan, in which students are invited to post essays and photos on subjects ranging from their lives in school to their favorite books, magazines, and movies.

Since the project was launched in September, Ms. Kaplan has received at least three postings from a class in Damascus, Syria, sent to her by a teacher via e-mail; she has another commitment to participate from a teacher

in Bahrain. Students from Ms. Kaplan's classes are expected to contribute, too. At the end of the year, her school will publish the scrapbook postings, most likely online and in print.

Established Network

Although U.S. government officials want to promote efforts such as iEARN, they find many such programs struggle to find American schools to take part, said Anna Mussman, a program officer in the State Department's bureau of educational and cultural affairs.

"The challenge is finding programs that fit into the curriculum," she said, "and finding the time to do it."

The strength of the iEARN program, Ms. Mussman said, is that it has an established, devoted worldwide network of participants, and that it relies on a relatively simple, inexpensive service, which provides contact with countries with only basic connections to the Internet.

Orca Elementary School's contacts reflect that global reach. In addition to their dialogue with Iran, Ms. Law's students have used iEARN to share information on water habitats with students in the Republic of Vanuatu, an island nation in the South Pacific. Other teachers in her school have used iEARN to connect with schools in China and Egypt, she said.

Ms. Law recalled that both she and Ms. Noorbakhsh, in Iran, were guarded in their initial discussions about their lives in and out of school. Gradually, they came to recognize their shared interests. That experience has helped convince the Seattle teacher that her students will overcome inhibitions of their own.

"Their government puts forth a lot of rhetoric. But there's a lot [about Iran] that's hidden from us," Ms. Law said. "We have a culture of being very introverted, and being concerned with only doing things our way. Technology is taking that away," she said, "and, I think, giving us a gift."

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"New USAID Strategy Addresses Quality Along With Access," June 8, 2005.

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