

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

## Students 7,000 miles apart find friendships

Video letters sent over Internet link Eastern Middle School class and Pakistani kids



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

**Sixth-grader Brooke Mulshine records a video for her web partner in Pakistan at Eastern Middle School. Sixth-grade students at Eastern have partnered with students at a middle school in Pakistan to send each other video letters about life in their respective countries.**

**By Paul Schott**

The chatter in Eastern Middle School teacher Bridget Suvansri's sixth-grade English classes used to reverberate within the walls at 51 Hendrie Ave.

In the past month, it was heard some 7,000 miles away in a classroom on another continent via computer. oth sets of listeners found a lot to learn from each other.

"In one of the first videos, I was asked if I was obese," said the decidedly not-overweight Logan Smith. "It kind of shows you what everyone thinks of America."

Suvansri had always planned to have her sixth-graders read "I Am Malala," the autobiography of Malala Yousafzai, the 18-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner who survived a grisly gunshot to the head after defying the Taliban and pursuing an education

in her native Pakistan.

But Suvansri changed her idea of the Malala unit after she stood on a soccer field sideline with Neesha Rahim, the mother of one of her students, and the two got to talking.

Rahim and Amy McCooe, who also has a sixth-grade son at Eastern, founded and run Level Up Village, a social-enterprise business that creates digital learning exchanges between American students and youth at schools overseas.

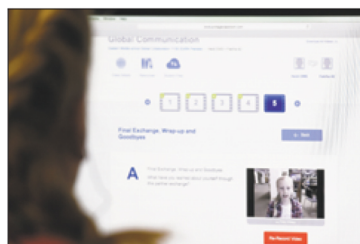
Working with a Pakistani nonprofit, Level Up set up a video-sharing partnership between Suvansri's sixth-graders and a group of middle-school students at an independent school in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city. It marked the first time that Level Up had collaborated with Eastern.

"It's been terrific," Rahim said. "I've been blown away

*See Students on A4*



**Sixth-graders Andrew Wiedling, left, and Josh Kahn record a video for their web partners in Pakistan at Eastern Middle School.**



**Sixth-grader Heidi McGannon records a video for her web partner.**

FROM THE FRONT PAGE



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**From left, sixth-graders Julia Bonanno, Caroline Yu and Brooke Mulshine record a video for their web partners in Pakistan on Wednesday. Sixth-grade students at Eastern Middle School have partnered with students at a middle school in Pakistan, and are exchanging video letters about life in their countries.**

## STUDENTS

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by these kids. Every time I listen to their video letters, it gives me hope."

Using Level Up's website as the conduit for exchanging recorded videos with their Pakistani counterparts, Suvansri's students have discussed "I Am Malala"'s themes and also learned about daily life in their respective countries. Using an English language arts curriculum was a first for Level Up, which usually bases its exchanges around science, technology, engineering and math topics.

There were a few pre-conceptions that students from both schools had to tackle.

Suvansri's students were surprised by how well their partners spoke English. The Karachi students are fluent, although their native language is Urdu. They come from middle-class families, but many of their peers do not have the same opportunities.

"My partner said that a lot of people don't get an education, but she's one of the kids in her community who does get an education," said Heather Zitzmann. "I was a bit surprised by that because I thought our educations would be more similar."

After overcoming the early awkwardness, the sixth-graders said that they struck up a rapport with their partners. They said that they have enjoyed researching Pakistani pastimes including the game of cricket. And they also discovered that they had much in common — not least a commitment to community



**Sixth-grader teacher Bridget Suvansri asks students in her class at Eastern Middle School what they learned from their web partners.**

## Program operator

» Level Up Village is a social-enterprise firm that has run cultural exchange programs in the following Greenwich schools:

Eastern Middle School, Riverside School, Old Greenwich School, the International School at Dundee, North Mianus School, Cos Cob School, Parkway School, Julian Curtiss School, Whitby School, Carmel Academy, Greenwich Country Day School and Stanwich School.

For more information about Level Up, visit [www.levelupvillage.com](http://www.levelupvillage.com).

spend six hours in school every day here, I think that changes their perception."

Suvansri's students have now finished recording their five videos for the partnership. Rahim and McCooe, the Level Up co-founders, said that they see the sixth-graders' experience as a model for other exchanges focused on an English language arts curriculum.

"We've been very impressed by what we've seen," McCooe said. "The questions from all the students have been fantastic." And some of Suvansri's students envision taking the partnership further; a few have even landed invitations to stay with their partners if and when they visit Karachi.

"There are a ton of monuments in Pakistan, which he says he'd want to take me to, said Logan Smith. "And supposedly there are lots of fun shopping places."

[pschott@scni.com](mailto:pschott@scni.com);  
203-625-4439; twitter:  
[@paulschott](https://twitter.com/paulschott)

service, an interest in video games and horror movies and an affinity for One Direction.

Talking about Malala herself, however, turned out to be a more difficult task. Malala's advocacy for education and girls' and women's rights and her immigration to England have made her a controversial figure in Pakistan, where some see her as representing anti-Muslim forces — even though she is Muslim — and being too sympathetic to the West.

Suvansri decided to steer her students' questions to their partners away from Malala so that they would not make their partners uncomfortable.

"Having that conversation with my students alone about what's not being talked about in the exchange is such a learning experience for them in realizing ... what we have the freedom to do here,"

Suvansri said. "I can pretty much introduce any book that I want and we can have conversation we want. It's not the same there."

But the sixth-graders did not totally shy away from discussing the Nobel Peace Prize winner with their partners.

"We both admire Malala because she spoke out for what she believed in," said Brooke Mulshine.

The students in Karachi got just as much out of the partnership as their Greenwich counterparts, said Abdullah Syed, Level Up's communications manager. He formerly worked for the Pakistani nonprofit with which Level Up teamed to establish the exchange with the Karachi students.

"America to a lot of these kids is New York City and big buildings and eating McDonald's every day and having a bunch of toys," Syed said. "For them to realize that you have to