

Partner Programs Link Students

Aian Nugmanov, a 13-year-old boy who lives in Almaty, Kazakstan, knows what it's like to gasp for breath on a day when the skies are smoggy or he's in a smoky room. He hates it when asthma sidelines him from after school games. In Tucson, Arizona 12-year-old Scott Holmes also suffers from asthma. In March, the two boys and 11 other children, ages 9-14, linked up via computer to discuss how they manage their asthma.

"When you play sports, do you wheeze?" one child typed into a computer. Another asked, "What type of inhaler do you use?" Each child's answers were then displayed on a large screen so that all the participants could view them.

"This is a health issue our two communities share," said Emily Jenkins, project director for the Tucson/Almaty Health Care Coalition. "Asthma is a very big problem in Tucson; more children are dying of asthma here than they were five years ago. In Kazakstan, respiratory disease is the leading cause of death of kids in the first few years of life."

The partnership has worked with the Almaty Pediatric Institute over the last two years to improve the health of children with asthma. As a result, more doctors are prescribing inhalers for children to use when they feel an asthma attack beginning rather than waiting for life threatening symptoms that require a trip to the hospital.

"In both Tucson and Almaty, we're promoting a sense of prevention and patient involvement. We're teaching kids and their parents to become managers of their own health care," Jenkins said.

The asthma project is one of two projects that link students in AIHA partner cities. Students in Cleveland, Ohio and in partner cities in Slovakia plan to embark on similar chats this spring to discuss health and lifestyle issues. Students from Cleveland schools, in areas where there is a relatively high number of residents of Slovak descent, will talk about smoking, drinking, peer pressure, dating and other issues with teens in Martin, Banska Bystrica, Turcianske Teplice and Bratislava.