

US-NIS Student Exchange Program Promotes Health Education

By Barbara Ruben

Last fall, when eight high school students from Chernogolovka, Russia traveled to an Anchorage, Alaska high school to exchange ideas about health issues, they were flabbergasted to find classes dismissed for the day. The students were encouraged to attend lectures and other programs as part of the Great American Smoke Out, an annual event sponsored by the American Lung Association that asks smokers to refrain from lighting up for a day.

"We'd rather stay in class," Russian language teacher Michele Whaley recalls the Chernogolovka students telling her. "It completely perplexed them. Their attitude was that smoking was a personal choice, not one that required school time to analyze."

When the American students travel to Chernogolovka, on the outskirts of Moscow, this spring, they expect to experience similar cultural gulfs. Understanding not only health issues, but the perceptions and attitudes that shape them, are goals of the School Linkage program, administered by the US Information Agency (USIA). The Anchorage-Chernogolovka project is one of 18 health exchange programs between US and NIS schools, in which US and NIS students travel to their respective partner high schools for a month each school year. Health is one of an array of topics students can choose to study; some of the other 20,000 students involved in the program since it began in 1993 have structured their exchanges around environmental, diplomatic and business issues.

The Anchorage and Chernogolovka students are now setting up surveys on the World Wide Web about drug use, smoking, eating habits and exercise, to understand each others habits and attitudes.

East Anchorage High School student Vanessa Lewis visited Chernogolovka last spring. "They don't have the same level of worry about smoking and alcohol. At birthdays they passed out glasses of champagne. They looked at me funny when I refused to drink, but they didn't make a big deal out of it or anything," she said. "It's a fascinating opportunity to see first-hand each others' lives."

In another project, students from Harvard-Westlake High School in North Hollywood, California have been paired with St. Petersburg Gymnasium #2 and study a range of health and lifestyle issues. When the California students traveled to St. Petersburg last year, they taught classes on AIDS and even demonstrated use of a condom.

"It's been a great experience for both my students and the ones in St. Petersburg. You can sit in separate classrooms and talk about cultural differences, but actually traveling and learning together is really enlightening for everyone," said Luba Bek, who started working with the program as a teacher in Russia. Today she teaches health and Russian at Harvard-Westlake. "The chapter I taught on nutrition turned out to be a major revelation for the St. Petersburg students. The same with many psychological issues. For example, there isn't even a word for 'self-esteem' in Russian."

Other exchange programs include 13 schools in Florida that are linked with schools in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Kazakstan. Last fall, 54 students and 14 teachers from the NIS schools visited their partner schools to write and illustrate bilingual health pamphlets. As part of their research, the students gave health surveys to students parents and community members. Teachers worked on health education lesson plans. In February, the Florida students traveled to the NIS to complete work on the pamphlets.

"The School Linkage program is one in which both American and NIS schools can very clearly see the benefits," said Barbara Zigli, USIA's manager for the program. "The peer-to-peer activities take the students beyond the classroom and into whole new worlds."