

Washtenaw Promise

Belief in the future. For every child.

Penpal to a Preschooler More impacting than you might imagine!

Spending time with preschoolers in school is not always an easy thing for our volunteers to do. Needs for transportation, scheduling of consecutive hours, weekly consistency, and personal safety (during covid) can all make it difficult to commit to regular volunteering onsite. If that's true for you, or if you simply would like to supplement your hours of onsite time, we hope that you will consider a "penpal" relationship with a preschooler.

This option, designed by Katie Watson, behavioral specialist at Beatty Early Learning Center, is an opportunity to connect with one child through a weekly exchange of brief letters, drawings and other artifacts. This program was created to bring back the beauty of handwritten letters and encourage children away from a screen. It fosters language development, practice writing and recognizing letters and imagination! Some of our preschoolers have never received their own mail before!

If you decide to be a penpal, we will guide you through the experience and facilitate the exchanges each week. For the child, it is an opportunity for that priceless connection with another person outside the family. To know that there is someone "out there" who cares, someone who takes the time every week to share news or stories, to ask questions, to offer encouragement and affection, to notice, and just to be there, often means more to a three or four year old child than you or I could imagine. Many underserved children simply do not have enough connections with people outside the family to reinforce them, validate them, bring new experiences, and encourage the development of a healthy and strong self-image. The impact children may feel, simply as the result of a weekly friendship via mail, cannot be overstated. Already in our penpal program, which began late last year, we see kids who light up with the news that their letter has arrived, nearly begging their teachers for the time to hear the letters read and to respond in their own way. That moment of connection becomes something they look forward to with excitement and joy. These commodities in a classroom are everything.

Keys to a penpal relationship are consistency and reasonable longevity. To become a penpal, we ask that you commit to one letter every week—handwritten—for the winter term. We will assign you a student in a classroom (more than one, if you like!) and the teacher will know that your letter is coming every week. The teacher will arrange a weekly classroom activity which will include reading of letters to all students, since our program assures that every student in a given class will have their own penpal. The head teacher, assistant teacher or a volunteer in the classroom will read your letter to your student and will provide time and encouragement for them to respond. We're confident that you will be touched by that response every week.

If you've had any experience with a young child, you know that almost everything interests them, as long as it is age-appropriate. We'll help with topics or ideas, if needed. Typically, simple words and sentences work best, along with drawings you might make, perhaps pictures that you

can enclose in the envelope, or even small mailable “artifacts,” like an acorn you found, a beautiful pebble, leaf, pressed flower, or something you crafted out of...almost anything! A page from the book of your life will be as interesting as any book, if not more so! The joy that comes to the child from your letters may also inspire more interest in decoding the written language, learning to write letters and numbers, expressing oneself through shape, color and texture. You may very well be inspiring interest in art, literature, and most important of all, human communication!

There should be no limit to the imagination as to how and what can be communicated to a small child in an envelope. Your creativity will encourage theirs and at some point during the term, you may be very welcome to show up at the school to meet your penpal.

To add this to all the other expectations and demands on you during school, may be a lot. But please keep in mind that the return could be much greater than you think. Touching a young life brings joy to all of us. It keeps us reminded that when we nurture we are nurtured ourselves. When we connect, we are more connected and when we share our joy we become more joyful. Please join our penpal program. We would love to have you with us!