

TOPICAL

## Letters for Seeley: Elementary students from Missoula to New York write encouragement to school closed by fire

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With pencils, crayons, markers and pens, Cleveland third-graders wrote letters for first-graders at Seeley Lake Elementary, who have been unable to start school because the nearby Rice Ridge fire forced evacuations and smoke settled in the valley at beyond-hazardous levels.

"I hear that you do not get to go to school because of all the fire," wrote one Ohio boy. Another letter with a blue-and-red striped heart filling the page read, "I am praying for you and your school."

One girl, sounded out the letters for "persevere" and wrote, "Prsver and do your work. Work hard."

"Good luck little first-graders," wrote another. "Hope you have a good school year."

When Maggie Burwick's first-grade class returns to school — on Monday, if weather and fire status permit it — encouraging letters with postmarks from Missoula to New York will be waiting for them.

The letter campaign started as the idea of Melissa Wogsland, a Cold Springs Elementary teacher in Missoula.

"I was lying in bed one night just thinking, 'What can I do to help?' And I was overwhelmed by that question alone," she said. "So I thought, 'Start small.' What can we do as a class to help those kids feel positive?"

She reached out to Burwick, who she had never met, to suggest that her class could comfort fellow first-graders in Seeley, adopting them as pen pals for the year. From there, the teachers took to Facebook with the idea.

"I want to partner with some area teachers ... or teachers from anywhere," Burwick wrote Monday on her page. "It's been a crazy fire season in their community... lots of them are evacuated or close to it. Does anyone want to have your students write letters to my kids? It would be a great way to welcome them back."

Wogsland upped the ante, setting up a donation box for coffee cups and snacks to support the Seeley teachers, too.

"Let's come together to support our fellow educators and students during these trying times," she wrote, punctuating her post with a heart emoji.

Several teachers from the Missoula area and beyond saw the social media requests, often after being tagged by friends or relatives, and have told Burwick to expect their support.

"This is what teachers do," Burwick said. "They know how to take care of each other and my kids are in need of that."

For weeks, Seeley Elementary has been wrapped in smoke that reached record levels on Wednesday. The level of particulate matter in the air averaged 18 times the National Ambient Air Quality Standard over a 24-hour period. It was almost twice that level at several snapshots taken early Thursday morning. The dense haze is a persistent reminder of the Rice Ridge fire that has burned more than 120,000 acres and killed the tourism season a month or more before its typical end, crippling family budgets for the year to come.

The burn area is one and a half times the size of the city of Cleveland, where Natalie Rich's third-grade students started school five weeks ago.

"We don't have forest fires here, so this is something completely foreign for them," said Rich. "They know evacuate means to leave some place but they don't know what it's like for a community to have to leave their home."

She saw the call for letters because she is Facebook friends with Burwick, who she met in a graduate teaching program at the University of Montana. Rich's classroom is decorated in the campus' colors with a large Griz on the wall along with other UM décor.

"I think they're always like, 'What is this Montana place?' They go with it. It's not a real place to them," Rich said of her students who attend a public charter school in downtown Cleveland. "It gives a little context and an opportunity to talk about another part of the country. It's nice to be able to talk about other kids somewhere else living a totally different life."

Closer to home, Beth Ryan's first-grade class at Desmet also worked Thursday morning on their letters to Seeley students. A friend had passed the post along to her and she "jumped right on it."

"It was awesome, heartfelt, respectful," she said of the idea. "First-graders get super excited when they get stuff. To get mail or letters, I thought of my first-graders and how happy it'd make them."

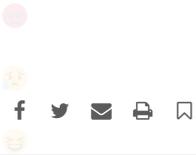
Her students are going through multiple drafts this week so they can send the letters this weekend. Fresh out of kindergarten, Ryan has had to help students spell the words they want to say, writing them down for the students to copy.

Her own class had to wear masks during recess this week, and the kids were only able to walk, not run, because of the smoke spread over all of western Montana. For Ryan, a Clinton firefighter who worked on wildland crews this summer, the scale of the Rice Ridge blaze and its weekend push over established fire lines is astounding.

"It was an amazing idea that a teacher wants their kids to feel special even when they're going through something so nasty," she said.

Burwick agreed, grateful for Wogsland reaching out to start it all.

"It's been a neat experience to see how far away people do care," she said.



#### Write to Seeley Lake Elementary students

Teacher Maggie Burwick said anyone interested in writing to her first-grade students to welcome them back to school, can send letters to:

First Grade

Seeley Lake Elementary

200 School Ln.

Seeley Lake, MT 59868

Snacks for teachers or school supplies and gifts for the students also can be dropped off at donation boxes in the front lobby of Cold Springs Elementary, 2625 Briggs St, Missoula, MT 59803.

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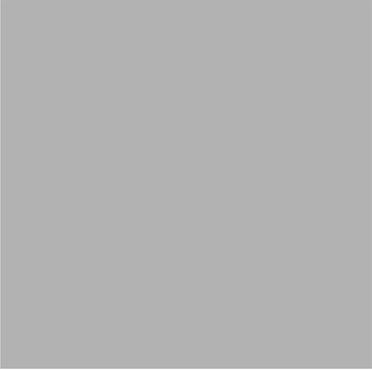


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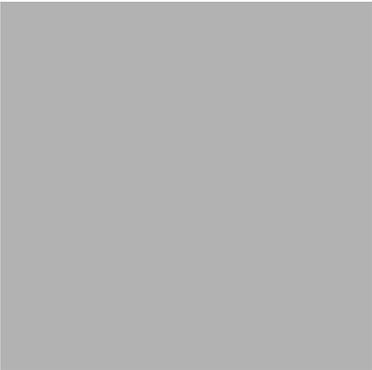
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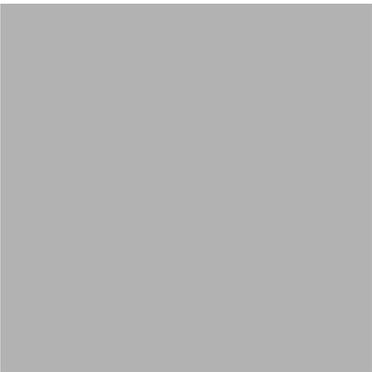
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