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Aikin to help connect families, soldiers

By Mary Madewell

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Santa Claus could come in the form of a videoconference call between local families and loved ones in Iraq thanks to Aikin Elementary School and Paris Independent School District.

Aikin technology specialist Frances Reed, with the assistance of Principal Pat Gilbert and PISD technology director Benny Tschoerner, have teamed with FreedomCalls Foundation of New York to make video calls possible during the holiday season.

Families with loved ones serving in Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah or the Al-Asad Airbase can participate. The three bases are the only military installations to have teleconferencing capabilities, Reed says.

"This season is about spending time with family and loved ones," PISD Superintendent Paul Trull said Friday. "We are delighted to offer our videoconferencing capabilities to bring the troops in Iraq and their families in our community together."

Gilbert said Aikin has several staff members and students with family members in Iraq.

"We realize how important it is for families to be in contact with each other, especially at Christmastime," Gilbert said. "We are thrilled to be able to enter into this partnership with FreedomCalls to provide support to families in our area and their loved ones who are proudly serving our country."

Reed said a news report spawned her interest in FreedomCalls.

"I read a news report during the Thanksgiving holiday about a videoconference that FreedomCalls had set up that enabled a family to 'share' a Thanksgiving meal with a loved one serving in Iraq," Reed said. "I told my husband, 'this is something our district needs to be involved with.'"

Reed said she is amazed with the capabilities of modern technology.

"To even imagine the technology that would enable individuals to do this kind of thing in a war zone was unheard of just a few short years ago," Reed said.

"That our district even has these resources — the videoconferencing equipment and the technological capabilities — is exciting enough, but to be able to use this equipment in this way, to help keep families in touch in such an immediate, tangible way, is thrilling beyond words."

Families interested in participating in the program can contact Reed at 903-737-7443 or by e-mail at freed@parisisd.net.

mary.madewell@theparisnews.com