

## Students talk to soldiers via satellite connection

*Troops answer questions about serving in Iraq*

by [Ray Scherer](#)

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A group of St. Joseph Christian School students Friday helped brighten the seamless Iraqi landscape U.S. soldiers awaken to daily.

The students — sixth-, eighth- and 10th-graders — traded questions and answers with a small group of U.S. Army personnel via satellite for part of their school day. A New Jersey-based program operated by the Freedom Calls Foundation allows troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to speak with families and others through video conference links. The students gathered in the library and could see themselves and the soldiers chat over a partially split screen.

“When we see you guys like that, it makes us happy,” one soldier said of the two-way video link.

The troops didn’t reveal their names and declined to discuss their assignments, citing the sensitive nature of their roles. They also rejected at least one question about combat experiences. To Daniel Gregory and Jordan Morrison, the conversations offered at least some insight into the Army routine, nine hours and thousands of miles away.

“Rule No. 1 — ” one female soldier advised Daniel, “Your everyday scenery never changes, but you keep a positive mind frame about it.

“There’s sand everywhere,” another said of occasional storms. “It’s a big beach with no water.”

Another soldier told Jordan that video games, sleep, shooting pool and watching movies constitute a majority of any free recreation time siphoned from long hours of duty.

The hour-long hookup arranged by Freedom Calls concluded Missions Week, an annual event in which students perform service projects.



Photo by [Eric Keith](#) / St. Joseph News-Press

Luke Martin, lower right, drew a quiet room when he asked U.S. soldiers in Iraq if they had ever been to the battle front. It was a question that the soldiers didn’t want to answer during the hour-long video conference call at St. Joseph Christian School.

Others among the 40 students selected for the interaction asked the troops about Iraq's flora and fauna, favorite sports and foods, tips of military discipline and what they miss about home. A few of the soldiers said they plan to stay in the military, while others said they desire familiar or new civilian roles such as business managers and firefighters.

Likewise, the troops queried the students and remarked about their education, career choices, dating and their appearance.

"Stay in school, seriously," a soldier advised.

Leadership was Missions Week's theme, said superintendent Lydia Zuidema.

"All year long, we've been concentrating on the military and their needs," she said.

For example, Ms. Zuidema said elementary students made 12 quilts that were sent to military units and the entire student body itself raised more than \$3,000 to benefit service personnel.

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