

School aims high

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Kiroli Elementary students talked via ham radio Thursday to Astronaut Satoshi Furukawa at the International Space Station. Paul Wiedemeier, associate professor of computer science at ULM, shows where the space station will be in range to start radio contact. Below, Connor Wiedemeier makes contact with Furukawa. / Ben Corda/The News Star

The excitement was palpable Thursday and the [energy](#) electric as 500 students plus faculty, staff and guests packed the cafeteria at Kiroli Elementary for a once-in-a-lifetime experience — a conversation with an astronaut aboard the International Space Station.

Kiroli is the first school in Louisiana selected by NASA to communicate with the space station through the Amateur Radio on the International Space Station project.

The application to participate was submitted to NASA by the school, ULM [computer](#) science professor Paul Wiedemeier and local physician Dr. Benson Scott.

Wiedemeier, who is also the parent of two students at Kiroli, prepared the students for the event with a satellite map of the earth projected onto a movie-size screen.

"The blue dot is Kiroli Elementary," Wiedemeier said gesturing to the map. Just to the northwest side of North America was the International Space Station, surrounded by a circle which indicated the area for successful radio communication. "Slowly that circle will move toward us and Connor (Wiedemeier, his son) will make a call to the International Space Station."

As the circle neared the blue dot, the room was completely quiet. Connor began his call at the moment that the outer circle touched the blue dot. "NAISS, this is AE5V," he said. "It's time for our scheduled ARISS [contact](#), how do you copy?"

After several attempts, a faint voice responded through the static. "I read you loud and clear," astronaut and physician Dr. Satoshi Furukawa, aboard the International Space Station, answered.

The group had about a 10 minute window to ask questions. One by one, 22 students asked prepared questions and Furukawa answered. Question number 23 went unanswered as the circle around the space station left the blue dot of Kiroli Elementary.

Students asked Furukawa about how fast the space station traveled, how astronauts work and sleep in space, and what astronauts do when they're not working.

Furukawa thanked each student for asking their questions and answered each one thoroughly and patiently. One student asked how the space station avoided space trash.

After explaining that with sufficient notice they are able to navigate around it, Furukawa relayed a recent event. "Three months ago, (something) came within 1,000 feet of the space station," he said. "We were thankful it did not hit the space station."

After the conversation, students asked Wiedemeier and the radio experts more questions.

"All we can do is plant a seed," Principal Carolyn Norris said of the children's interest in the scientific event. "I think we've planted lots of seeds today."

ARISS contacts are provided to K-12 schools and educational institutions worldwide through a partnership between NASA, the American Radio Relay League, the Radio Amateur Satellite Corporation and other amateur radio organizations and space agencies in Russia, Canada, Japan and Europe.



On Thursday students at Kiroli Elementary were able to speak via ham radio to JAXA Astronaut Satoshi Furukawa (M.D., PH.D.). Kiroli Elementary in West Monroe was the first school in Louisiana to talk to an astronaut on the International Space Station. Connor Wiedemeier attempts and makes contact with the International Space Station.