

## Coming face to face

### Videoconferencing brings Bright School, Mexico City students together

By *Clint Cooper* Staff Writer

As it turns out, third-graders in Mexico like SpongeBob SquarePants, too. Nine Bright School third-graders learned that fact last week when they participated in a videoconference at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga with 12 students in the third grade at Colegio Cristobal Colon, a private school in the suburbs of Mexico City, Mexico.

The videoconference, arranged through the Department of Continuing Education at UTC and held in the university's Fletcher Hall, was staged to enhance the language skills of both classes.

"We're all about building a child's understanding and learning the value of other cultures," said O.J. Morgan, headmaster at Bright School. "When you're learning Spanish, this makes it real. You connect to children your own age. You make that human connection." Chris Willis, a technology specialist at UTC, said such a videoconference is not difficult if the two parties have the appropriate equipment and high-speed Internet connection. He said before the videoconference could be confirmed, he and his Mexico City counterpart at La Salle Universidad had to perform a test to see if their equipment was compatible. "It's pretty groundbreaking," he said.

Because of the cost of equipment — a minimum of \$10,000, according to Mr. Willis — videoconferencing is not widely done in area schools, especially in elementary schools. Girls Preparatory School, thanks to a matching foundation grant, purchased and has been using videoconferencing equipment since early 2003.

The heart of such equipment is the codec processor, which essentially compresses the outgoing audio and video and simultaneously decompresses the incoming audio and video, Mr. Willis said.

An ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) line through the University of Tennessee at Knoxville transmitted the voice and data in digital format.

During the videoconference, the Bright School pupils saw and talked to the Colegio Cristobal Colon pupils in real time.

A camera, operated on a touch panel from a control room by Mr. Willis, could swing around the room in which the students sat and pick up each student or pull back for a wider shot. The children raised their hands as they asked questions to help the camera pick them up quickly.

Bright School officials said they hope to have a videoconference with the Mexico City school every month. "It's our vision for it to be a regular sort of thing," Mr. Morgan said. "That's our goal."

He said he appreciated UTC's help in managing the technical end.

"UTC has been wonderful in setting it up, helping us understand how the equipment works and setting it up with (the Mexico City) institution," Mr. Morgan said.

The subject of the videoconference, originally scheduled for December, was holiday customs. The Bright School pupils asked their questions in Spanish, and the Colegio Cristobal Colon pupils answered in English. The Chattanooga students sang "Jingle Bells," and the Mexico City students recited one of their school cheers.

The students from both schools also introduced themselves, asked each other what sports they enjoyed, what foods they liked best and what television shows they preferred.

The Colegio Cristobal Colon pupils said they liked pizza and burgers, while many of the Bright School pupils said they had an affinity for macaroni and cheese. When the Mexico City students asked about Chattanooga, one Bright School student said, "There are lots of things to do here." Another reported the city had a river and mountains.

The students said they saw a lot of value in the videoconferences. "They get to know people in our country," said Jack Kelly.

"We learn another language better," said Lizzie Downs.

"They learn another (language) better," said Ralston Hartness. Laura Goetz, the Spanish language teacher at Bright School, once was a teacher at Colegio Cristobal Colon, a school of 1,300 with an average of 35 students per class. She said the videoconference was Mr. Morgan's idea to go "beyond the classroom" and exchange cultures. She said the event originally was set up through e-mails between school officials. E-mail Clint Cooper at [ccooper@timesfreepress.com](mailto:ccooper@timesfreepress.com)



**Staff Photo by Tim Barber** Bright School third-grader Lizzie Downs speaks Spanish to students in Mexico via teleconference at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Headmaster O.J. Morgan, seated beside her, says the exchange helps students learn the value of other cultures.



**Staff Photo by Tim Barber** Bright School third grade students Victoria Norris, Sharron Bockman and Taylor Thomas, from left, listen during a teleconference with students from the Colegio Cristobal Colon school in Mexico City.