



From this week's Focus

Attorney hopes to spur reading frenzy

By: Dee Gill July 14, 2008

If Seth Weinberger were an ordinary software developer, this would be the story of another tech genius on the verge of making millions on a nifty new gadget. After all, his Teachermate, a Game Boy-like device that holds personalized reading and math lessons, is like nothing else out there.

But Mr. Weinberger is no techie. He's a 53-year-old corporate attorney who, after

"Literacy alone can't break someone out of poverty. But if they can't read, they won't have a chance," Seth Weinberger says. Photos by John R. Boehm

helping start a private Evanston preschool for his own kids, decided to help less fortunate children.

"Literacy alone won't break someone out of poverty, but if they can't read, they won't have a chance," says Mr. Weinberger, a partner at Mayer Brown LLP in Chicago. "And all the research showed if kids don't learn to read by the end of third grade, they probably never will."

It has taken him 15 years, but with the Teachermate, Mr. Weinberger believes he's put together all the elements needed to help educate children at risk of failing: lessons they and their teachers will eagerly use, a price tag cheap enough to get it into hundreds of schools and the potential to generate enough profit to give it to hundreds more.

Grants totaling \$450,000 from the J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust are paying for the rollout. Starting in September, they will give Teacherates to each child in one first-grade class in 500 Chicago public schools. The foundation may fund a similar pilot project in 20 more underperforming U.S. school districts and five cities abroad.

"The content was effective and engaging, benefiting both teachers and students," says Mark Rigdon, vice-president for global philanthropic strategy at the J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation. "And it's very economical."

A little bigger than a BlackBerry, the Teacherate resembles a handheld video game and comes with a color screen, a set of control buttons, a built-in microphone and a speaker. Each unit is loaded with math and reading lessons — some in game form — that follow the state and city's curriculum.

At the end of the week, the teacher downloads each child's work — including voice recordings of the student reading aloud — onto a computer to help track progress. The teacher then reloads each device with whatever level of lesson is deemed appropriate: One student may need work on subtraction and first-grade vocabulary, while another can graduate from beginning readers to books with chapters and start fraction problems.



Although the devices have been in only a few schools for a few months, Mr. Weinberger already has collected supportive testimonials from Chicago Public Schools officials and teachers, including one who wrote that her students would work on the Teacherates all day if she let them. But perhaps the most important breakthrough is in the cost: \$50 for each device, and \$20 each for the reading and math software. The hardware to help download the work runs \$130.

Mr. Weinberger says Teacherates costs 90% less than what most schools pay to maintain computer-based reading and math curriculums. And he estimates it's 25% less than workbooks.

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When Mr. Weinberger started the project in 1992, he knew so little about software that he had to teach himself programming from Macromedia manuals. But he was convinced he could create

computer games that were as much fun but more educational than Reader Rabbit or anything else he saw at Best Buy.

A law client that specialized in shoot-'em-up computer games created the graphics for the first software. They made Jimi Hendrix the main character and called it "Electric Reading Land," while Mr. Weinberger recorded his own 4- and 5-year-old children for the other characters' voices. In 1993, he started a non-profit organization called Innovations For Learning Inc. to distribute it to schools.

Innovations' professional programmers now laugh at the amateurishness of that effort, which the non-profit gave to underperforming Chicago schools like Jenner Elementary in Cabrini-Green. But it worked. Thousands of other schools bought copies through the publisher, which still pays the organization royalties.

By 2007, Innovations' budget had grown to \$800,000 a year with a staff of six that had produced 12 curriculum programs.

But Mr. Weinberger long understood that software alone couldn't cure poverty or illiteracy. Public classrooms get few good computers, and teachers don't have time for technical glitches. "The first time the computer broke, they were done with us," he says.

In late 2006, the Innovations crew found the answer to their problem: cheap MP4 players, which removed the programs from classroom computers and put them on handheld devices. The organization buys them for about \$50 and sells them at cost. The \$20 Innovations collects for each software load is gravy, profits that can be used to get the device into the hands of millions more children after the grant money is gone.

The Teachermate won't make millions for Mr. Weinberger. He earns \$1 a year as executive director of Innovations and nothing from sales.