



SCI-TECH SCENE | Innovations for Learning's gamelike 'teachermate' could replace outdated classroom PCs

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About half of the 500 schools will get the teachermate in September.

The teachermates will be unveiled Friday at a professional-development conference in New Orleans.

Innovations for Learning created the "teachermate" to give teachers and school children in grades K-2 an easier, more efficient way to use computers to learn reading and math than the outdated desktops most public schools use.

The first students to work with the teachermate at Jungman Elementary School in the North Lawndale neighborhood are transfixed by the games and coursework in the language-arts programs, said first-grade teacher Martha Arriaga.

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By Sandra Guy
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A Chicago-based non-profit has developed what it hopes will become the iPhone of elementary education, for only \$50 per handheld device.

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Mark Rigdon, global program director of JPMorgan Chase Foundation, said, "By keeping the price of the teachermates so affordable, Innovations for Learning may have finally solved the puzzle of how to provide individualized instruction to the millions of students in need across the country."

Seth Weinberger, executive director of Innovations For Learning, said, "It could be the iPhone of education in bringing technology to the masses of public school children. There are too few computers in the classroom, too many of them are broken and too many of them are 'hand-me-downs.'"

Weinberger expects many school principals to buy teachermates for their entire schools.

The handheld devices, 4 inches wide and 3 inches tall, are simple and light at 4.4 ounces, with eight buttons, a 2.5-inch color screen, 500 megabytes of internal memory, a battery life of four hours, and a built-in microphone and speaker. The devices are rugged enough to withstand a 5-year-old's use, according to the nonprofit.

The teachermates work with a classroom management program, which Innovations for Learning offers for free with each teachermate.

The teacher identifies in the program the reading and math programs he or she uses in the classroom's core curriculum. Each week, the teacher updates which unit of the math and reading programs the class will learn that week.

HANDY WAY TO LEARN

The teachermate automatically syncs the information to the teachermates so the students' activities are aligned with the coursework. The students' scores on the teachermates are automatically synced back to the teacher's computer so the teacher can generate reports of the students' progress.

Innovations for Learning also has developed a "Sync and Store Case" that lets all of the teachermates to be charged using one electrical outlet and to be synced to the teacher's computer with one USB cable.

The teachermate uses educational programs proven by research to be effective, said Weinberger, who noted that Innovations for Learning is consulting with a team from the University of Chicago on its math program.

The reading program similarly uses methods shown to be effective by independent research, Weinberger said.

The reading programs allow children to record their voices and hear them on playback, and compare their reading with a pre-recorded child's voice. They can hear whether their reading and pronunciation were correct.

The first-grade reading program includes stories and word activities in English and in Spanish, and lets the teacher decide how much of each language to use.

Said Weinberger, "We've put 15 years of thinking into how to make this system easy to use in the classroom for the teachers and the students."

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